

"Harry could you come down here? We need to talk," Petunia Evans shouted up the narrow stairs. Petunia was a tall, thin woman with dark hair and a long, thin neck that was perfect for spying on the neighbours. She was a quiet, timid woman who mostly kept to herself. Petunia was very nosey - that was why she spent so much time spying on the neighbors - but she never really expressed her views to anyone for fear of an awkward moment or ridicule. Anyone except Harry that was.

A small head appeared from around the corner at the top of the stairs, peered down, and said, "Whatever it is, I didn't do it! They made a mistake!" Harry Potter, a healthy eight-year-old boy, had messy black hair that was currently gelled up in short spikes. He had bright, shimmering, green eyes that held a picture of pure innocence that would deceive anyone who did not know him well.

Upon seeing his aunt's grave face, he bounced down the stairs in such a way that only a child could. Looking at his Aunt Petunia's face, Harry tried to decipher what it was that she wanted to talk to him about. Could he have done something terribly wrong? Had gluing the teachers cutlery onto the tables been taking it too far? Before he could ask, however, Petunia spoke.

"I-I-I have something t-to tell you. S-something that you should h-have been brought up kn-kn-knowing."

Harry was confused. Why had Aunt Petunia stuttered? She was never nervous around him. It must be something horrible or really hard for her to say or both. And really important, he added. Harry tried his best to make it as easy as he could for her to say.

"It's alright," he said gently. "You're telling me now. Take all the time you need." Harry wasn't angry in the slightest anyway. This was the first secret (that he knew of) Aunt Petunia had kept from him. Perhaps he would have been annoyed if she had waited until he was much older to tell him but that didn't matter. What mattered was

making whatever it was as comfortable as possible for Aunt Petunia to say.

Petunia still looked troubled and was shaking slightly as she said, "Well, em, you see, I er, well..."

"Yes?" Harry prompted kindly.

"Em, well, lets see, there is a lot of things I haven't told you," she began carefully. "About your parents."

At the mention of his parents, Harry's eyes widened in shock. Ever since he could remember whenever he had asked about his parents he had been told, "Someday I'll tell you, when your ready." He had given up trying to find out about them a long time ago. Harry knew there was some secret behind his mother and father that his aunt would tell him when she was ready but he had not thought that day would come for a long time. Now that that day was here, he wished to make it as easy for his aunt as he could.

"I will tell you tell you everything about them but you mustn't ask any questions or interrupt until I'm done," Petunia continued with slightly more confidence. Harry, feeling this was reasonable, inclined for her to go on. "You may not believe me at first Harry, but you must for it is all very real. Your parents were a great witch and a great wizard."

Harry stared, eyes widening, eyebrows rising.

"Well, I suppose I should start with your mother. The summer before your mother was due to start high school she received a letter. A letter that told her she had been accepted into Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Naturally she assumed it was a practical joke, so she threw the letter away but the letter had aroused suspicion in your mother and I. It had been addressed to Lily of course, at our house but it had also been addressed to her room. But how had they known where she slept? We dismissed it but the next day another letter came, identical to the first, requesting Lily to send her reply back by owl. You can imagine our confusion. It was almost as if they - whoever sent the letter - knew that we had thrown the first out. We threw this letter away as before but another came the next day, and the next. We continued to throw them out but more always

came. Lily a witch? Preposterous! But what about some of the things Lily had done? The letters came in such vast quantities that we could no longer ignore them. We read through them thoroughly. The next day a 'wizard' came to our house and told us about the magical world. We were skeptical of course, but the wizard showed us magic that could not have possibly been tricks. Your mother went off to the magic school for seven long years, only returning for the holidays. But there was trouble in the magic world."

Petunia took a deep breath. "An evil wizard was gathering followers. His name is so terrible that even now it is said that if you speak his name, he or his followers will slowly and painfully kill you and torture your friends and family. I daren't say it. This wizard was killing anyone who wasn't completely magical. While your mother was at Hogwarts, she despised a boy for everything he said and did. In her opinion he was nothing but a bully and a womanizer. She changed her mind completely about him when she and him were made head boy and head girl. She fell in love with him. His name was James Potter, your father. Shortly after they left school you were born and shortly after that, a man told them of a prophecy that had been made about you. Lily told me the prophecies contents even though she was under strict orders to tell no one. The prophecy went something like this,

The one with the power to vanquish the dark lord approaches...

Born to those who have thrice defied him,

Born as the seventh month dies...

And the dark lord shall mark him as his equal,

But he will have power the Dark Lord knows not...

And either must die at the hand of the other

For neither can live while the other survives...

The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies...

It means that you will either have to kill the-person-whose-name-I-cannot-say or be killed by him but you will have great power which will be to your great advantage. Lily, like your father, wanted to protect you so they put some fancy magical protection thing on the house where you used to live. For this spell they needed to have one person know where the house was and only that person would be able to tell someone elsewhere you were. Lily told the man who had told them the prophecy that the secret keeper was James's best friend, Sirius Black (your godfather). The man then told several other people. Your parents changed the secret keeper, however, to a less obvious choice. They changed to Peter Pettigrew and I believe the man-who-knew-about-the-prophecy knew about this change but chose not to say anything. Peter Pettigrew betrayed Lily and James and on Halloween the man-whose-name-is-dangerous-for-me-to-say came to the house. He killed your father in battle and then proceeded to kill your mother whilst she tried to protect you. When the man-who-murdered-your-parents turned to kill you, he vanished and all his powers disappeared along with him. The other man, to whom I have referred to multiple times, would like you to believe that you survived the death curse because Lily sacrificed her life to save yours but really the curse didn't rebound. You just survived somehow and sent your own curse back at the man-who-tried-to-kill-you. The other man does not want you to know about the great amount of power you have.

"Now, when Sirius Black heard about what happened he went to the ruins of your house to take you and raise you like Lily and James wanted but a messenger from the man who knew the prophecy got there first. Sirius then went to attack Pettigrew for what he had done but Pettigrew framed him and transformed into a rat after blowing up the street giving the impression Sirius had murdered thirteen non-magical by-standers along with your parents. The man-who-concealed-a-lot did not help Sirius escape going to wizard prison.

"I am sure you are wondering why I keep referring to a 'man' rather than give him a name. The reason I keep referring to a 'man' is because if I say his name, he will know immediately what I have been telling you, against his wishes. His spies and spells are everywhere and when he finds out (which I do not think will take very long) he will have me killed but he will claim that I was under the control of the-

man-whose-name-I-cannot-say who is his most despised enemy. The manipulative man is the reason Lily and James are dead. The whole magical world thinks very lowly of normal non-magical people even if they don't realize it. The manipulative man will try and bend you to his will and force you to do whatever he wants. He is the headmaster of Hogwarts. Once I am dead he will move you to a place where he can keep a very close eye on you. It would be safest for you Harry, if you grow up in the normal world.

"I will give you a bit of money so you can get to the middle of a large town but that is all I can do. You must not trust anyone who thinks lowly of non-magic people. You must not let yourself be manipulated in any way. I am sorry Harry but this is the way it must be."

Harry, who had sat silently throughout the entire tale, could only stare open mouthed. He was a wizard? Well, he supposed, that would explain a few things but... magic wasn't real, was it? And he had two psychotic wizards after him? He had heard of course of evil wizards after children in fairy tales but in them there was only one evil wizard after the hero or heroine and fairy tales weren't real. Did that mean that because there were two wizards after him that it actually could happen? Did that even make sense? Did anything? His aunt hadn't lied to him before so why should she start now? Harry continued to ponder.

Petunia gasped, attracting Harry's attention at once. "They're here," She said barely above a whisper, voice trembling.

"So soon?" Harry asked alarmed.

"Yes! You have to get out of here! No there's no time to pack! No time! There's no time to go the normal way! Go! Now! Just picture yourself somewhere in London and go! Picture it very hard!"

"But-but-b-," Harry stuttered bewilderedly. All of this made absolutely no sense!

"But nothing!" Petunia shrieked. " Get out of here NOW!"

"But what about you?"

"Don't bother about me! I've known for ages that the day I told you would be the day they found a way to get rid of me! Now go!

"But-!"

"Go, Harry, before it's too late!"

"But they might-?"

"Go!"

"What if they-"

"Go while you still can!"

"Why don't you-?"

"GO!"

Harry, deciding that his aunt's mind was made up and that he could do nothing to change it, did as she requested. The last thing he saw before he disappeared was the door bursting open in the living room and his aunt's terrified face.

Several men and women burst through, wands drawn, faces determined. Petunia barely had time to give a sigh of relief as she saw Harry leave before the men and women entered. One of them shouted, "Stay where you are Deatheater and tell us what you've done with Petunia and the boy!"

"Who are you calling Deatheater," Petunia said with boldness she did not know she possessed. She did not phrase it as a question either, but said it angrily through clenched teeth.

"You scumbag!" another shouted. "What have you done with the real Petunia?"

"The real Petunia died years ago when your lot killed her family. This is all that's left of me!" She said quietly, tears in her eyes. In the silence, not one person missed what she said.

"Liar!" barked a ruff voice.

Petunia ran to the back of the room, picked up a vase and threw it at them in a desperate attempt to get away. A witch with brown hair ducked as it flew over her head. Another shouted a strange word at her and a red beam came out of their wand, heading straight for Petunia.

Every person in the room was astonished when the beam was absorbed in an invisible shield that surrounded her. Including Petunia.

Petunia continued to attempt to fight her way to the exit amidst their spells, every one of which was absorbed in the same invisible shield. Each attempt to bring her down was to no avail. Some of the spells were not absorbed in the shield however, but were rebounded straight at their castor who fell from the force of the spells. Petunia was almost at the exit when a wizard, seeing no other way, shot a green beam at her. The beam went right through the shield and hit Petunia square in the chest. She fell to the ground, her last thoughts of her nephew, Harry Potter.

"Well done Mad-Eye!" said a witch with brown hair.

"Don't congratulate me yet, Hestia," replied the wizard "Mad-Eye" solemnly. "We need to find that boy and soon. Before another Deatheater finds him and helps poison his mind against us."

"If he believed that one," said a stern looking witch. "Then we'll have to wipe his memories too. Otherwise the wizarding world may never be free of You-Know-Who."

"Right, let's find that boy!"

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In a dark alleyway behind some shops and restaurants, Harry Potter fell to his knees panting. He had been trying to protect his aunt with his new found power with all his might but it hadn't been enough. He had helped her a little, but he had still failed.

Petunia Evans, Harry Potter's only relative, was dead.

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Harry did not know how long he sat there, silently mourning the death of his aunt. Nor did he care. Harry knew that where Petunia had gone she could not come back from. It had started to rain but he paid no attention. He let the drops of water trickle down his face, mingling with his tears. He just sat there on the filthy ground ignoring the putrid smell coming from the large bins either side of him. Harry might have sat there a lot longer but somewhere above him, a voice spoke.

“Hey, kid, you alright? Wher’s yer folks?”

Harry turned to look at the speaker shivering with the cold. It was a teenage boy who looked no older than fourteen. The boy looked filthy and was wearing old, worn clothes with frayed ends and several tears. Harry decided there was no point in lying to him. He didn’t look like a wizard or the sort of person who would send him to an orphanage.

“They’re dead,” Harry croaked, his throat sore from crying.

“Well then, wher’s yer guardian?”

“She –“ Harry said fighting back another sob that threatened to overcome him. Saying it made it seemed so final and definite but Harry was an intelligent boy. He knew that he would have to admit it sooner or later and the sooner he admitted it, the sooner the pain would go away... right? “She died.”

“Now tha’s a rite ol’ shame now init? When d’it ‘appen?”

Harry closed his eyes and said, barely audibly, “Today.”

“So ye’d have no ‘un tae look after ye then?” the boy asked, thoughtfully.

It was all Harry could do not to break down crying again. Jerkily he shook his head.

“Well then, I’d be knowing jus’ the place fer ye.”

"N-not an orphanage?" he asked meekly, repressing a shudder. Everyone knew how horrible orphanages were. Everyone except the social services it seemed.

"Nah not one o' *them*," the boy said. Harry got the feeling that there was a certain amount of hatred behind that statement. "I'll be takin' you somewher' ther's kids jus' like you." The boy offered Harry a hand up which he took without thinking. "Ma name's Sting."

"That's not your real name is it?" Harry couldn't help asking as they started walking down the alley. Surely someone hadn't actually named their child "Sting"?

"Naw, but I cannae tell ye ma real name 'cause an op might be here 'n turn me into the cops or a shelter see? Nah ye can only tell your closest mates yer real name."

"What's an 'op'?" Harry asked as they turned the corner into a busy street.

"Man you got a lot tae learn kid. A op is a ordinary person see? A non-street kid if ye like."

"Oh."

"Aye, 'oh' indeed."

"My name's —" Harry began before Sting cut him off sharply.

"What did a jus' tell ye?"

The pair of them walked on for half an hour or so; Harry asking many questions and learning many things. Sting told him how he and some other street kids had made an organisation to look for and help other street kids. There was around twenty children that lived with them already. Each child was put into a group and the groups were each given a job (or jobs if they were small) to fulfil each day. The groups had to take care of themselves all day until the early evening when they returned to an abandoned building, which they had claimed for themselves, where they ate the dinner one of the groups provided. The groups were normally made up of children around the same age

but where the younger ones were concerned, an older person went with them.

Because a lot of the children had people looking for them, (which were normally the police for any number of reasons) all the children had been given fake names that the group thought suited them. Other children were given new names because they had no name. They had been abandoned as babies into orphanages and foster homes.

Finally Sting and Harry came to an old, run down building, with boarded up windows and graffiti all over the walls. Sting showed him a colourful message which Harry found almost impossible to read, and said, "This 'un's mine. Real beaut init?" Harry did not know quite what to say to this so they walked on in silence round the side of the building where Harry could see a large metal door bolted shut with chains and nails.

"'ome sweet 'ome," Sting sighed in contentment. "There's no way in, see? That way the cops can't find us or nufin. There's no way in... unless you know one."

Harry stared at him. Did he realise that had made no sense? If there was no way in, how could you know one?

Sting led Harry around the back of the building and got down on his hands and knees making Harry stare even harder. He then started tapping the wall. He's a nutter isn't he, Harry thought still staring at Sting.

"Don' look at me like tha'," said Sting seeing Harry's raised eyebrows. "I hav' a point. Ah here we are." He knocked at a different part of the wall, deep in concentration. A few seconds later, a series of knocks came back in reply. Sting gave a couple of sharp knocks back. More knocks. Sting sighed.

"Oi! Swampy! Lemme in!" Laughter came from the other side of the wall and ten or so bricks were pulled inside, all joined together, leaving a hole, just wide enough for Sting to get through. Sting slid down onto his stomach and poked his head through and quickly pulled it out again. He looked at Harry with a serious face, dripping

wet. "Oh it's on now," he said and he swiftly slid through the hole, leaving Harry no alternative but to follow.

When Harry got inside he saw he was in a sort of lounge. There were several old, moth-eaten sofas, along with a couple of dirty rugs and little camp-like fireplaces set up along the floor ready to be lit. The room was really quite large. Harry looked around for Sting and saw him shouting and laughing as he and another boy ran after each other trying to pour buckets of water on the other. When finally they came to a stand still, Sting said,

"S'not much, but it's 'ome."

Harry turned his attention to the other boy who was rather wet. He had a pale face, dark hair and very inquisitive eyes.

"This 'ere's Swampy," announced Sting by means of introductions. "His parents died in a fire and now he's lookin' fer his triplets who think he's dead."

"You know," said Swampy slowly. "You don't *have* to tell everyone."

"Jus' a bit o' background information," said Sting but as he did he gave Harry a small wink.

"My name's-" Harry began.

"Getting thought of tonight," Sting finished forcefully.

Harry could tell there was quite a bit of familiarity between Swampy and Sting but before he could ask them about it a knock came at the wall.

"That'll be some of the others," said Swampy and he went over and knocked back. He then pulled on a string that Harry hadn't noticed before and the wall slid inwards. Several small children slid through.

"Ello," one of them said putting on a street accent. "Am JJ n' am five." Harry smiled politely and said hello. The others, following his example, introduced themselves to Harry one by one, some with much more real accents.

Slowly more and more children arrived, each introducing themselves to Harry as they came in. They all went in and sat round fires (and lit them) in twos or threes. A small dinner was distributed between everyone, after which Sting stood up.

"I'm sure all ye' smart people 'ave noticed we 'ave a new person wi' us. Stand up kid!"

Harry stood up obediently and felt all eyes snap towards him instantly. He shrunk back a little as a gasp reached his ears but from who, he couldn't tell.

"Now, what name should we give 'im?"

Names were shouted out eagerly, clearly enjoying it. To Harry it seemed this was one of their favourite pass times.

"Bolt!"

Sting tilted his head in consideration.

"Emerald!"

"Mm," said Sting.

"Ems!"

"Er..."

"The-boy-who-lived." This was not shouted but said evenly though everyone heard. Harry's mouth opened slightly. Did someone know about him? Impossible! Right? Millions of questions flashed through Harry's mind.

"Too long," said Sting.

"Shade!"

"That's just odd."

"Shadow!"

“Hmmm...anymore suggestions? No? Ok then. Le’s vote! Who wants Bolt?” Several hands shot into the air. “Emerald?” Again several hands raised into the air. The list went on and Sting continued to count.

“Oritey then,” Sting said. “His name shall be...” Harry drew in his breath subconsciously.

“Wait! You can’t be serious!”

Everyone turned as one to face the source of the voice. Harry couldn’t see anyone as they were hidden in the corner by the shadows.

“You can’t let him stay!” the mysterious voice cried.

“And why not?” Sting said narrowing his eyes. “Why shouldn’t he stay, Mir?”

“Don’t you know who he is?” the voice asked clearly and loudly.

“I know exactly who he is!” retorted Sting, forcefully.

“Then you should know there will be millions of people looking for him! If he stays here we’ll all be found,” the voice exclaimed. As the owner stepped out of the shadows, Harry saw who the voice belonged to.

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Out of the shadows stepped a small boy, who, from his appearance, looked to be a skinny five year old but his face held a maturity that suggested otherwise. He had dirty blonde hair, which Harry supposed, could never have been washed. His eyes were a dull blue; his face defiant. He wore a large pair of jeans, which were held up with a piece of string. They were faded, not with style though, with age. The boy's baggy brown jumper was massive compared to his thin frame. His face was pale and gaunt and his cheekbones were unusually noticeable. His large eye bags told Harry that the boy hadn't slept properly in weeks.

When Sting spoke to him he used a rough voice that Harry had not thought possible when speaking to someone so frail and innocent looking. "Why shouldn' 'e stay 'ere? 'e's got no kin left o' his own tae go tae. Every 'un here had people lookin' fer 'em, what's diff'rent bout him?"

"The people looking for the rest of us never possessed the kind of power these people have," the boy said slowly and coolly. "Do you not understand? They will stop at nothing to get him back. He is their saviour! And when they find him, they'll find us. They won't care what happens to us."

Harry didn't understand. Why were they fighting? He didn't want to make anyone mad. He just wanted a place to live and to stay away from the magic people. When the boy turned and rounded on Harry, he shrunk back slightly out of fear as he felt a slight tingling sensation in the air.

"You have to understand!" he cried with desperation. "You'll be putting us all at risk. Do the right thing and go! Never come back!"

"Stop it!" a girl shouted. "Look at him! He's just a child. He's done no wrong. Leave him alone!"

"Would ye all just shut yer traps fer one moment," Sting said evenly. "This ain't getting us nowher' fast. I say we 'ave a meetin' n' discuss it ther'. Kay? Right, kid stay 'ere. We'll be back soon."

Sting herded the kids up the shabby stairs leaving Harry alone to think. He tried to listen but it was impossible to distinguish anything except muffled arguing. Harry soon gave up. Sting seemed to be one of the ringleaders or at least one of the more outspoken kids. Some of the children seemed unnaturally shy, like they were scared of something. Everything felt so unreal. His life had fallen to pieces in a single day. He'd had a nice normal life, lots of friends, a good home, a caring aunt. He'd had fun. He'd been happy and normal. All that had been taken away from him because some guy killed his parents because some other guy wanted to use him. Now all he had was halves. Half stories, half truths and half knowledge. He was sitting in some big organisation of children, most of whom Harry assumed were orphans. They appeared to know something he didn't. They all lived such terrible lives but when they had entered the building they had been happy. How could they be happy living like this? Harry was very confused.

After a very long time (at least it seemed long to Harry who had nothing to do but think) the kids returned down the stairs, every one of them silent. Some of them looked rather confused, others annoyed and the rest triumphant.

"We've made our decision," said a scrawny boy indifferently.

"We've decided ye' can stay," Sting said miserably.

Harry just looked at him. He knew he should be happy but something just didn't feel...right. The fact that they were letting him stay meant most of them liked him... right? That he would be safe and have people looking out for him... right? Then why didn't he feel like it? Here he was, surrounded by people, and he felt alone. *Does it really matter?* Came a nagging voice from the back of his mind. *What difference does it make whether you're with them or on your own out on the streets?* If I'm here then I have shelter and food and I can make friends, he told himself. But there was plenty of shelter away from here too, he reasoned. He'd just be a burden to them; and extra mouth to feed. But they had plenty of food and even some going spare. But where had they gotten so much food from though? Sting said a couple of them had jobs, Harry recalled, but jobs that paid enough to feed twenty? They could be well-paid jobs. Unless they

stole it... They wouldn't do that though. Stealing was wrong. Wouldn't they though? What did he really know about them? Well even if they did steal it, Harry could help them find other ways of getting food. They'd have to keep him alive though for him to do that. That wouldn't be hard. He didn't eat very much but then again he *did* have those magic guys after him. He might put them in danger.

Like you did with Aunt Petunia.

That wasn't my fault, Harry thought pushing the nagging voice away. I didn't know then. He knew now though and he was still going to risk putting them in danger.

Why did Sting sound so sad that you were staying if he didn't mind you putting them in danger?

Why *had* Sting sounded so sad? Harry had thought Sting was arguing for him, so why had he sounded so down? He might have changed his mind...

Before Harry could think any longer about this, the boy who had argued from the shadows, spoke.

"Oh yes," he said bitterly. "You're staying... for a night."

Harry looked up at him stricken. They didn't want him to stay? But why? Harry voiced these thoughts and in return the boy gave him a sympathetic glance and said,

"We just can't risk it. It's nothing against *you*. Honest Tell me, how much do you know about who you are?"

Harry told him everything. Everything except the prophecy, which he felt he shouldn't tell many people about seeing as his parents hadn't. It felt a great relief to tell them actually. Harry normally would have told his best friends about it but, they weren't there. It suddenly hit him that he might never see his friends again. The thought almost made him collapse with grief again.

"We're real sorry bout this," Sting whispered to him later that night when they were all settling down to sleep. "We don' mean nufink by it,

it's just, well, there's a lot of us here n' all. We couldn' let 'em all be sent away, we just couldn'."

"It's okay," Harry said softly. "I understand." And he did too; he just didn't like it. Where was he going to go? Where was there *to* go? How would he find food? Millions of questions like these zoomed through Harry's mind. "I don't know what to do," he said miserably after a few minutes silence.

"I can give you some pointers then," Sting said relief etched onto his face at finally being able to do something for Harry. Sting told him how he could get food, avoid being found easily and where he could stay amongst other things.

"There's just one other thing," Harry asked quietly. "How did you and that boy from the shadows find out about me and the magic guys?"

Sting sighed. "S'pose I oughta tell you. The least I can do. Come on. Best we go outside."

Harry followed him obediently outside where they walked away from the abandoned building. They stopped outside a shop window where Sting felt they wouldn't be heard as it was late at night. Harry gazed at him in wonder.

"Well, ye see, me n' Mir, well, we came frem wizardin' families."

"What? Then why are you on the streets why don't you just magic yourself somewhere nice?"

"S'not as easy as that. See, them wizards, they gots powers like you've never seen. They can kill in an instant."

"How did you get away then?"

"I didn'. Ma da', well, wen I wer li'l he didn' like me much tae say the least. After a while he jus' abandoned me."

Harry could tell Sting wasn't telling him everything. He knew there was more to it than that but he decided not to push the subject seeing as Sting didn't seem to like talking about it.

“What about the other boy then?” he asked.

“Mir? Well he was ‘bout five wen he n’ his younger sis’ got lost in the streets when some rogue supporters of You-Know-Oo went n’ attacked his family. He n’ her wer’ tryin’ to run away, see? Only they gots lost n’ the wizardin’ folk jus’ decided they were killed or summit. I remember ‘earin’ bout it.”

“Oh,” Harry said surprised. “Was his sister there too then?”

Sting looked at the ground. “No.”

“Where is she then?”

“Mir was away stealin’ some food for ‘er, ye know, lookin’ out fer ‘er, when the cops went n’ saw his sis. I saw ‘im goin after ‘em. I stopped ‘im. No use them both bein’ caught. We went to the police station that night but when we got there, she was gone.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’ be. There was nufin anyone coulda done.”

“Did you ever find out what happened to her?”

Before Sting could answer however, a bright light blinded him and Harry.

“Oi! Stay where you are! This is the Police!”

Harry felt his heart beat abnormally quickly in his throat as fear set in and he turned to run out of instinct but stopped when he heard Sting mutter to him discreetly.

“They got nufin on us yet. Do exactly as I say when I says it right? And whatever ye do, don’t go back to the home.”

Harry nodded numbly as he felt Sting grab his arm to stop him running away again. He looked towards the bright light, and raised his arms to shield him from it almost instantly.

“What are ye chargin’ us fer?” Harry heard Sting ask defiantly.

“Loiterin’. Don’t move! And unhand that boy.”

Sting released Harry’s arm leaving a dull ache. The torch was lowered and a couple of policemen walked over to them.

“Las’ I heard, bud, this ‘ere pavement was a public place,” Sting said, dodging the hand that was trying to grab a hold of him. The policemen did not bother taking hold of Harry but one of them stood behind him blocking his route of escape.

“Well you heard wrong,” a policeman snarled. “What’s your name boy?”

“Charlie,” Sting muttered.

“Oh really?” one of the policemen asked. “Well then *Charlie* I’m putting you under arrest.”

“What fer?”

“On the charge of loitering and attempting to deceive the law.”

“What? I never done nufing like that.”

“Then how come the last time I met you, you said your name was Sting? There, boy, your coming with me.” The policeman held Stings arm firmly. “And this time, no funny business.”

Harry glanced, terrified, at Sting whose head was held high and wondered what they were going to do. He looked back and forth between the policemen and Sting as no one moved. There was no way to escape; the policemen had carefully stationed themselves to ensure that.

“You kid,” the policeman behind Harry said. “I’m gonna take you to your parents and they can decide how to punish you. Where do you live?”

“But – but-“ Harry stuttered, thinking quickly. “You can’t do that. They’ll be really mad.” Perhaps he could pretend to be a scared innocent eight year old? Wait a second he *was* a scared innocent eight year old. What did he have to fear? He would probably end up this way eventually anyway, so why not now?

“Where do you live?” the policeman repeated irritably. “If you don’t tell...”

Harry chewed his lip, hoping that it appeared to be out of anxiety. What should he say? What could he say? What was there *to* say?

The decision was made for him however as Sting yelled, “Run!” and kicked the policeman holding him in the shin and ran himself, not even looking back to see whether Harry had run or not. Harry, however, did not acknowledge this as he had turned, kicked his policeman as well, and bolted in the opposite direction, hearing the policeman running behind him.

He dashed into a side street; the policeman followed, gaining distance. Harry skidded round a corner into a dark alley and fell to a stop as he gazed horror stricken at the brick wall standing before him. The policeman chasing him slowed down to a walk at the alley entrance, panting slightly.

“I’ve – got – you – now- kid,” he panted in between breaths.

Harry gazed up at the wall willing it to disappear. Maybe he could make it go away, just for a second, so he could get through. He could use his newly found powers and magic it away. Surely he could do that?

The bulky policeman advanced slowly, laughing. "Nowhere to run kid. Nowhere. I've got you now. Just tell me where Sting went and I'll let you off."

Harry glared at the wall. Why didn't it move? Why was it still there? Come on! It was now or never. The policeman was only a few feet away. "Move!" he finally yelled desperate for it to go away.

The man lunged forward and grabbed Harry's arm painfully again. "I think not kid; you're coming with me." He dragged Harry back the way they had gone and back to the police car which was parked outside the shop that Sting and Harry had been talking outside. The policeman threw Harry into the back seat and sat himself sneeringly into the drivers.

The other policeman joined them after couple of minutes of silent glaring. He returned alone.

"He got away *again*," he growled, as if it were Harry's fault. "How old are you kid?"

"Eight," Harry muttered. How was he going to get away? If he somehow managed to magic himself away again they'd be bound to notice. The only way was to let them take him to jail. They'd eventually do so anyway, wouldn't they?

The policeman sighed. "Right, stop there, Jim. He's a minor."

The car screeched to a halt obediently. "What do we do now then?"

"We'll have to dump him in an orphanage for the time being and see if anyone's lost a kid."

Harry felt terror set in once more as a chill went down his spine. An orphanage? He couldn't go to an orphanage. Perhaps this was all just some bad dream that he was about to wake up from. The car jerked

into life once more and buildings began zooming by. If this was some horrible dream he was sure taking his time waking up. No, it had to be real. What was he to do then? He couldn't stay in an orphanage. He'd run away. Yes, that was it. He could stay for a night, then, in the morning, before anybody else woke up, he would run away. He glanced fearfully at the men in front.

They were sitting, one of them looking thoroughly bored, the other thoroughly disgruntled. The car came to a stop once more and the driver got out.

"Get out," he growled, and as Harry didn't move, he reached in and grabbed his now bruised arm. He half dragged Harry to the door of an old foreboding building and knocked sharply on the large door.

A rustling sound came from inside, followed by several loud thuds. The door creaked open and a tall woman stood behind it. She was wearing an old, worn dress and she wore an expression of disgust at the sight of Harry.

"He ain't mine offc'er," she spat and made to shut the door but the man holding Harry put his foot in to stop her.

"I know he isn't," he said in a falsely polite and courteous voice. "He's to stay here, ma'am, until his parents are found and he can be returned."

The woman looked Harry up and down and Harry felt he ought to feel offended at what appeared to be a judgement. It was like he was on a cattle farm and they were all lined up for the picking, except that he was the only one. He was very suddenly aware of the stains on his trousers and jacket.

"Alright," she said at last. "How long 'till you decide his folks aren't coming for him?"

"Three weeks," the officer said. "G'night ma'am." He touched his hat and left for the car leaving Harry and the woman alone.

“Well boy,” she spat at him. “What you standing around for? Get inside. Now!” She gave Harry a shove and he was forced inside the building.

The room was so dark that Harry could not make anything out other than the rug that was illuminated by the thin beam of moonlight that stretched through a window in the door.

The woman’s pale face suddenly looked much more frightening in the dim light and as she turned towards him again Harry could only stare in terror.

“Where’re your parents really, boy?”

Harry said nothing but he shrank back slightly.

Slap!

Harry raised a hand gingerly to his face where the woman’s hand had hit him. “I said,” she snarled. “Where are your parents?”

Still he said nothing. He rubbed his stinging face and glared at her. Why should he tell *her*?

Slap!

Her hand struck again, this time on the other side of his face. “Not a talker eh? You’ll learn boy, that when you’re spoken to you will reply. I’ll soon teach you some manners. Now I’ll ask you once more, where are your parents?”

Harry raised his head and spat at her.

“You impudent boy!” Slap! Slap! “You’ll spend the night in the cupboard for that and maybe in the morning you’ll be more willing to cooperate.” She clutched his now very painful arm and pulled him across the dark room and Harry wondered how on earth she could see where she was going. Somehow she managed, and unlocked a door, opening it a fraction. “In you go and not a word.” He was forced inside the small cupboard and the door was slammed shut blocking out all light. He shivered in the cold and clutched his knees in the

dark to warm himself. The woman's hard footsteps thudded down the hall and faded away.

Harry rocked himself back and forth, tears threatening to surface again. A light flickered on filling the cupboard. Harry blinked, the light blinding him slightly and squinted against it to see who was holding up the torch. A pale face stared back at him.

"Mir?"

“Mir?” Harry asked again tentatively, unsure of whether Mir had heard him. Harry thought Mir was still at the big building. What was he doing there? Maybe he could find out about his sister.

“Yes, boy?” Mir breathed in a depressed, monotonous voice. “What is it you want?”

Harry stared at him. Something had changed about Mir. He no longer had fierce look about him. In fact, there was no emotion about him at all. “I want to know what you’re doing here, of course! I thought you were still in that big building. What are you doing here?”

Mir looked at him for a few moments. His face was blank and his eyes were void of any emotions and thoughts. They bore into Harry who saw, in the torch light, that Mir looked even more tired than when he had seen him an hour or so ago. “What do you think I am doing here?” he asked still in the same monotonous voice.

Harry blinked. “If I knew that I wouldn’t have asked.” Mir was definitely acting odd, he decided. Before he had been quick to argue and hot tempered but now...

“I’m here because of you,” he said bluntly. “I shouldn’t be here. No, no. I shouldn’t be here. It’s your fault I’m here.”

A mad glint had appeared in Mir’s eyes now and though his expression stayed the same, it too changed and acquired the mad look. Mir leaned forwards and Harry shrank back in fear. He tried to press himself against the wall as far away from Mir as possible but as soon as he had moved, a sharp pain came to his back. He turned his head very carefully and in the dim light, saw something metal. Harry swallowed hard and turned back to Mir.

“I didn’t make you come. I didn’t do anything wrong. Honest I didn’t. How’s it my fault?”

Mir leant back but the strange look stayed on his face. "Not your fault. Not your fault. Your fault. You pried where you shouldn't have. Now I'm here," he murmured.

Harry gasped quietly. Did he know? Did he know what he had been talking about with Sting? Was he there? Harry swallowed again his throat suddenly very dry. "I'm sorry, but I still don't see how that got you here."

"You don't?" Mir sighed. The crazed look disappeared and the blank one returned full blast. "I was there. I heard you and Sting talking so I followed you. I heard what you said. You are too nosey."

"I'm sorry. I only wanted to know," Harry said earnestly. "I still don't see how that got you here."

Mir took a deep breath. "While you were busy trying to save your own skin, Sting got caught. He was trying to make sure you didn't get captured but obviously that was for nothing."

"But how did that get you caught?"

"I jumped the policeman." Mir's voice was no longer monotonous but sounded as if he was restraining himself from something.

"Oh." Harry looked at the bare floor. "Sorry."

Mir looked furious. He still talked in a forced calm however. "Sorry? *Sorry?* You think "sorry" cuts it? Do you have any idea what Sting risked by talking to *you*? Six years he's been on the run and he risked all that for you. I wouldn't have bothered if I were him. Who would want to risk everything for an ungrateful selfish little *thing* like you? Everyone who so much as talks to you gets into trouble."

Harry shook his head fearfully. "No," he said quietly. "No. That's not true. You're lying. I'm sorry. I really am, but there's nothing I could do. I didn't make him do anything."

"You guilt tripped him into it, didn't you, though?" Mir snarled, voice shaking. "Pretended to be the *helpless* little boy who's aunt he just

killed. And now, I'm here because I was helping Sting get out of the mess *you* got him into."

Harry stared at Mir hatred rising within him. Who was he to claim that it was all Harry's fault? He had done nothing wrong! It wasn't his fault that Aunt Petunia was dead.

But she would still be here if it wasn't for you.

Harry shook his head pushing the little voice out of his head again. No it wasn't his fault. Was it?

"Stop feeling so much," Mir hissed through gritted teeth. "She'll know."

"What?" Harry asked all hatred vanishing in his wonderment.

The cupboard door opened and light streamed in blinding Harry. A hand reached in and pulled him roughly from the cupboard. Somewhere between the door opening and Harry being thrown onto the floor of the hall, Mir had turned off the torch and hidden it somewhere. Harry caught one last glimpse of Mir's pale face before the door was slammed in his face.

Harry looked up from the floor and saw the old woman who had hit him the night before glaring down in distaste.

"Well, *boy*," she spat. "Had any more insights on where your parents are?"

He looked away, chewing his lip.

"Okay, *boy*. What's your name?"

Harry looked up into her enraged face. He still did not say anything.

Wham!

Harry was knocked back against the wall as a heavy blow fell upon his head. He slumped down to the ground where he started to cry

softly from the pain. He made no move to get up. It was so sore! He tried to look up at the woman but even that hurt.

“Well boy?” She raised her foot, threateningly.

Harry looked up at her terrified. He tried to back away but soon hit the wall again. She raised her foot higher about to kick. “My n-name’s –” Harry said desperately. What could he call himself? Anything. Just as long as she didn’t hit him again. “M-Michael.” That would do, he decided. One of his friends was called Michael. He wondered briefly whether he would ever see Michael again but was soon distracted from these thoughts as the woman looked down her nose distastefully at him.

“Nasty common name,” she said. “Perfect for a nasty common boy like you.”

“S-sorry,” Harry stuttered. “B-but I d-don’t know what t-to call you.” He pulled his legs up to his chest in case this warranted another kick.

“You will call me,” she hissed. “Miss Anderson. At all times. If I hear anymore questions from you, *Michael*, there will be consequences. Now over there,” she pointed at the far end of the hall. “Is a bucket of water and a toothbrush. I want you to scrub the hall floor until it is spotless, understand?”

Harry glanced up and down the immaculate hall. There was not a single speck of dirt anywhere. He was about to point this out to Miss Anderson when he saw her eying him beadily. He nodded mutely and hastened to get to his feet, screwing up his face in the pain from his ribs. He hobbled over to the bucket and picked up the toothbrush lying beside it. Harry looked up just in time to see Miss Anderson dragging Mir by the ear through a door at the distant end of the room.

He looked back at the bucket. What was he to do? The bucket was filled to the brim with water. Harry sighed and dipped the brush into it and put it to the floor to clean. After a brief moment of scrubbing a patch of the tiled floor Harry realised that it was making no difference whatsoever. He bit his lip. Would Miss Anderson notice if he didn’t do the whole floor? What if he only did parts of it? Surely she wouldn’t be

able to tell. He set to work again, focusing all of his attention on cleaning the spotless floor.

A while later, Miss Anderson returned. She leered over Harry inspecting the floor. "You imbecile!" she shrieked. "You call this clean? You've not even done half of it."

Harry looked up at her, frozen. How could she tell? He had done most of it. At least, he had put water over most of it. "I-I d-d-did the best I c-could," he mumbled. He began to shake in fear. No, he told himself. He shouldn't show fear. He shouldn't let her know he was scared.

"Liar!" she cried suddenly. Harry didn't even see her raise her arm. One second he was sitting holding the toothbrush and the next he was sent sprawling across the floor again.

Stars passed before Harry's eyes as they watered in pain. Miss Anderson picked up the toothbrush Harry had dropped and threw it at him.

"I was going to give you some food but since you felt that you didn't need to work properly, you'll have no food today or tomorrow understood? Now start again on the floor!"

Harry nodded glumly and shakily made his way back across the hall to start cleaning the floor again, ignoring any and all pain he felt.

Harry returned to the same cupboard that night, feeling exhausted and sore. He had spent hours cleaning the floor again and as soon as he was done with that he was made to clean the windows just as thoroughly. His muscles ached and he was so hungry that he thought that he wouldn't last until the day after tomorrow without eating.

So far Harry had only seen the hall of the orphanage. He had seen no one else besides Mir and Miss Anderson. It was almost as if there was no one else in the orphanage. Harry might have been tempted to believe just that, had he not heard movement from up the stairs all day while he had been cleaning.

Mir also returned to the cupboard that night and looked as exhausted as Harry felt. He looked somewhat annoyed as well. When Harry asked about this the only answer he got was, "I hate work."

The two of them sat in dark silence for a while and eventually Mir spoke. "We can't stay here."

Harry looked up surprised. What was wrong with staying here? They had food, shelter. Well at least they would if they worked hard and were given some but it had to be better than out in the streets. He could only assume that the other orphans were fed or else they wouldn't be allowed to stay with Miss Anderson. Social services would have taken them away or something. Harry voiced these thoughts also.

"Sure they're getting fed," he said disgustedly. "There's just the minor set back of them not caring anymore."

Harry wondered how Mir always seemed to know so much about these things than he did. Mir couldn't have been there much longer than Harry yet he knew nothing about these things. Harry dismissed this as his thoughts turned to other things. "Huh?" he asked bewildered.

“What Anderson does is she works them to the bone that’s what,” Mir said hatefully. “She breaks their spirits so they’ll do exactly as she wants ‘em to. That’s what she’s planning on doing to us too.”

“Planning?”

“Yes planning,” said Mir. “She ain’t though because we’re not staying any longer. I don’t plan on sticking around so she can do who knows what with us. I heard she once killed a boy because he wouldn’t dust the piano.”

“But how will we get away?” Harry wondered aloud. The door to the cupboard was locked after all and he was sure that the one to the outside was guarded too. There was absolutely no way they could get out undetected.

“Well you’re a wizard aren’t you? All we need to do is focus really hard so that the key will unlock the door for us or we can apparate.”

“You’re a wizard too?” Harry asked surprised. He had known that Mir had come from a wizarding family but it was still surprising to hear him saying it.

“Of course I am,” Mir said as if stating the obvious.

Harry stared hard at Mir. What did he want from him? He didn’t really expect Mir to be just being kind. No. Mir must want something from him. “Why are you helping me?” he asked.

“Because,” Mir began.

A few moments of silence passed.

“Because what?” Harry prompted as Mir remained silent.

“One, if I leave you here there is no certainty that you keep quiet. Two, if I leave you here you could die and the wizarding world needs you, whether you like it or not. And three, because I need your help.”

“My help?”

“Yes your help.”

“But what can I do? I can’t do anything right. Everything I do now keeps going wrong.” It was true too. Harry thought back to everything he had done since Aunt Petunia told him about the wizarding world. He had tried to save her but that hadn’t worked; he hadn’t been strong enough. He had tried to help Sting but that hadn’t worked. He had gotten Sting and Mir in trouble.

“You can do plenty of things,” Mir said. This surprised Harry. He had thought Mir hated him. “I need you to help me find my sister.”

“B-but how?” Harry stuttered.

“If you come with me, eventually you’ll get a letter to go to Hogwarts under whatever name your using. And when they send it to you they’ll recognise another magical signature, which they might not do if I’m alone. I’ll get a letter too then. My sister was always doing really powerful accidental magic. She’ll be certain to go to Hogwarts. I know that if I stick with you, one way or another I’ll find Chloe.”

“Chloe? Is that your sister’s name?”

Mir nodded. “She’ll have probably changed it by now, though. I don’t know what she’ll be going under now.”

“If you come with me though,” Harry said slowly. “Wouldn’t you be in danger? Wouldn’t the wizards come after you as well?”

“Yes. I don’t care, though.”

That warmed Harry’s heart. Maybe Mir didn’t hate him after all. Maybe they could become friends.

“We’ve wasted enough time,” Mir decided. “Let’s go.”

“What, now?” Harry asked alarmed.

“Yes now. Take my hand.” Harry did so feeling somewhat foolish. “And do exactly what you did when you were leaving your aunt’s. Wish really hard.”

Harry closed his eyes and willed with all his might to be somewhere else. He could feel Mir tensing up beside him, doing the same. They stayed like that for several minutes. They didn't move.

"Try. Har. Der," hissed Mir, jerkily.

Footsteps sounded above them.

Harry opened his eyes in shock. They were coming down the stairs. He closed his eyes hurriedly and tried harder than ever to disappear.

They reached the landing.

"Come on," Mir muttered. "It's now or never."

The footsteps walked down the hall.

Terror set in Harry. Those footsteps could only belong to one person; Miss Anderson.

They were just outside the cupboard now.

Harry screwed up his face wishing he and Mir weren't there.

A key turned in the lock.

Harry opened his eyes in fear and saw the door to the cupboard opening. Then, all of a sudden, it wasn't there. He was lying on his back staring up at the cloudless night sky, still clutching Mir's hand. He sat up and Mir did likewise.

"That was lucky," Harry said.

"Lucky?" Mir boasted, playfully. "Pah! Luck had nothing to do with it. That was skill."

Harry smiled weakly. "What do we do now?"

Mir looked around. They were in a children's play park. "Well, we can't stay here that's for sure." He got up, brushed the dirt off himself and started walking across the park. Harry jumped up and hurried to follow.

“Where will we go then? The place Sting took me before?”

“Don’t be stupid. We can’t go back there.”

“Well, where then?” Harry asked as they exited the park into a quiet road.

“That’s what we’re going to find out.”

The two of them walked around the streets for an hour at least, although to Harry it seemed like an age. They met no one but Harry suspected that was because it was either late at night or early in the morning. Nevertheless he was glad of it. He did not much want to have a repeat of the previous day’s events.

Eventually Mir stopped, so suddenly that Harry almost walked into him. They were beside two large bins in a small alley. Tall imposing buildings towered over them from all sides. Mir smiled.

“This will do us fine,” he said.

Harry raised his eyebrows. “We’re going to stay in bins?”

“No,” he said impatiently. “We’re going to stay in the empty flat at the top of that building.” He indicated the foreboding building to their left.

Harry had to put his head right back to even see the top of it. “And how are we supposed to get up there? Fly?” he asked sarcastically.

Mir grinned evilly at him.

Harry collapsed onto the moth eaten carpet of the dusty flat. Mir had decided that flying was a bit hard so he had settled for having them both climb up the drain pipe. It had taken Harry a very long time to work out how to get up without constantly sliding down after the first jump. His hands were rubbed raw and his legs ached all over. It didn’t help that he had had very little sleep since he had gone to the orphanage where he had been worked to the bone.

Harry lay down on the floor and, using his arms as a pillow, went to sleep.

Harry woke up the next day feeling pain in just about every muscle in his body. Wearily he got up wincing as the pain flared up. He walked through the rooms of the abandoned flat looking for Mir. He found him already awake and sitting against a wall. Harry slid down to join him.

“Are we going to live here?” he asked. He hoped not. It had been horrible just staying there the one night. Harry could swear he heard scuttling in the walls.

“No,” Mir said staring at the opposite wall. “Too dangerous. Sooner or later someone will come trying to sell it and sooner or later the wizarding folk will have a lead to where you are. Nah, we’ll just stay here for a couple of nights then we’ll clear off.”

Harry breathed a sigh of relief.

Mir laughed. “Come on,” he said. “I’m starving lets go get some food.”

He got up and held out his hand to help Harry up. Now that Mir mentioned it, Harry found he was really hungry as well. He hadn’t eaten in over a day. As if in response to this, his stomach gave a loud rumble. Harry smiled bashfully and said,

“I think I am too.”

Harry looked at Mir nervously. This couldn't be safe could it? They could get into a lot of trouble if they got caught. Mir motioned Harry to go. He took a step forwards shaking. He glanced at Mir again who glared and mouthed "Go!". Harry tentatively began to run forwards into the crowded street. Mir jogged slowly after him a safe distance behind him. Harry scanned the crowd. That guy? No, too strong looking. How about that guy? No he looked very intelligent. Harry looked over at a tall, kindly faced man. Him. Yes he would do. He gathered up speed and fake laughed. He hoped no one could tell. Harry sprinted towards the man and before he could think about it anymore, he ran right into him sending himself and the man to the ground.

"Oh!" he cried. "Oh I'm ever so sorry, mister. I didn't see you there."

Mir ran over and offered a hand to help the man up. "Sorry sir. We were playing tig. We must have gotten a bit carried away."

The man took Mir's hand courteously and, brushing himself off, said "It's quite all right, boys. Just watch where you're going next time okay?" Harry nodded his head vigorously like he was told. He saw Mir's hand disappear behind the man's back and knew what he was doing. "Right, now run along boys. And be careful!" he shouted as an after thought as they ran down the street.

Harry ran back into the alley where they had been before and waited for Mir who came running in a few seconds after him. Mir took out a wallet from his pocket. Harry looked at it uncomfortably. He hoped they wouldn't have to steal very often. He and Mir had had a long argument about what to do about their food predicament. From the beginning Mir had wanted to steal money to buy some and had stubbornly stuck to the idea. At first Harry had wanted to beg for some but then, as was rudely pointed out to him by Mir, realised that if they did that someone would probably call social services or the police about two young homeless boys. He then wanted to act poor and ask people in the streets if they had any jobs they could do for money but this idea was quickly shot down by Mir too. He had then

had no choice but to go along with the plan to steal. Harry watched as he opened the wallet carefully.

Out of it came several cards; bank cards, credit cards, membership cards. A couple of blank cheques came out of it too. Mir then opened the second part of the wallet. Out slid some green notes. Rifling through them he smiled. "Looks like we got lucky. There must be nearly two hundred pounds in here."

Harry shifted nervously. "Can't we give some of it back? We don't need that much."

"Yeah that's a great idea," said Mir. "We'll just waltz up to," he checked the cards. "Mr Smith and say 'Hey sorry we mugged you here's some of it back. We decided to spend the rest,' I hardly think he'll accept that."

"We won't have to do it often though, will we?" Harry asked. A feeling of guilt had set in him now. This was wrong. They couldn't go on doing this.

Mir looked at Harry almost sadly. "Think about it," he said softly. "These people have tons of money. We only take a little bit of it, and if we didn't, how would we live? How would we find money for food? We couldn't Harry. Don't you see? It's the only way."

He shifted around. "Yeah I s'pose so," he said. His stomach gave a particularly loud rumble. Harry brightened up. "So when do we eat?"

Mir and Harry found a nearby park in which to eat their lunch. They had inconspicuously bought sandwiches and drinks from a nearby shop. It was probably lucky for them that it was a weekend, Harry thought. Otherwise they would raise a lot of suspicion. After their hunger was satisfied, Harry asked a question that had been bothering him ever since they had left the orphanage.

"What do we do now?"

Mir looked at him confused. "What d'you mean?"

“Well what do we do now? We can’t spend all our time just stealing and eating can we?”

“No but, well, there’s not really much else we can do. Just now I think we should begin looking for another place to stay and after that we’ll need to get some provisions and such. We need to be prepared for anything, you know? You never know what’s going to happen nowadays. A lot of our time I expect will be spent hiding, stealing, planning, searching or something like that. It’s pretty much a twenty-four seven job. It will be a bit harder seeing as we have more powerful people after us than most, but that will just help add to the excitement. We’ll be begging for a scare soon enough believe me. It gets pretty dull after a while.”

Harry smiled grimly. “So we going now then?”

“Yeah might as well.”

Later that day Harry backed against the brick wall. Where had Mir gone? He had been right behind him just a few seconds ago and now he was nowhere to be seen. They had been looking for somewhere to stay and had gone up to the top floor of a tall skyscraper in their search. They had had no idea that there were already protective tenants living there. They had also had no idea that said tenants were a group of large thugs. So now Harry was cornered, on the roof of a very tall building with no means of escape and Mir had disappeared.

The three muscular youths who had followed Harry advanced on him menacingly. There had been another two youths with them when Harry and Mir had encountered them but presumably they had gone to follow Mir. Harry glanced in all directions looking for anything that could help him escape. Seeing nothing he attempted to stall.

“Er, I don’t suppose you just want to yell at me?” he tried weakly.

“Now what would be the point in that?” said a blonde youth in a rasping voice. He had a large scar running all down the side of his face. Harry hoped that he had gotten it in some terrible accident but he highly doubted it.

One of the three young men walked behind the brick hut that Harry had pressed himself against so tightly. The other two walked forwards and took hold of his arms and dragged him forwards away from the wall. Harry tried feebly to resist them but they overpowered him by far. They forced him to the edge of the building and soon Harry was looking out over the whole city buildings. He looked down. He regretted it almost instantly. He was so high up that the people going about their daily business looked like ants. He gulped audibly.

Harry barely saw one of the youths move as they swiftly reached down and grabbed his ankle. Before he knew what was happening he was dangling upside down. The other old teen took hold of his other ankle and together they hung him over the edge of the building. All the blood rushed to Harry's head as he looked horror stricken at their sneering faces.

From somewhere behind them the third person re-emerged carrying a long club similar to those used in games of rounders and baseball. He smiled cruelly.

"Now we have a lesson to teach you."

"Arrrrrrrgh!" Mir appeared from somewhere yelling at the top of his lungs. He sprinted over to the three men, the other two nowhere to be seen. He was running headlong and was going to knock the three men over, which Harry knew he was entirely capable of especially since he had the element of surprise. If he knocked them over though, wouldn't that send them all over the edge of the building? If Harry's purple face could have paled, it would have.

Harry watched frozen as Mir hurtled towards them, showing no signs of slowing. Harry doubted that, had he been able to move, (he found it rather difficult moving when he was being hung upside down from a building) he would have. Mir finally reached the youth with the club and ran straight into him, not even hesitating. The youth was sent flying off to the side while Mir, unwaveringly charged towards the two holding Harry. Harry gulped audibly. Mir ran full throttle into the boy holding Harry's left leg.

An expression of shock came to his face. It was clear that he had still thought Mir was bluffing and wouldn't run into him. The expression never left his face as he toppled over the wall that had been keeping him from falling before. Mir flew over the side as well; being unable to control the force he had hit the youth. The other youth who had not been hit by Mir had clung to Harry's leg still in all the confusion. He too was dragged over the side of the building.

Together they fell. Pedestrians from the ground looked up panicked. They scattered in all directions to get out from underneath the falling group. In the confusion the two men let go of Harry's legs and he was free to fall.

It was the oddest sensation Harry had ever had. He was terrified of course, but the drop was so big that for a moment they were just falling through air. He knew that they would surely die at the end of the drop but he didn't seem as bothered as he should have been. He should have been desperately trying to cling to something to slow his fall like the two youths but he wasn't. It was as if he knew that things would turn out all right. That was dumb. Things couldn't possibly turn out okay after a fall this bad.

Harry looked over at Mir who was facing upwards, arms folded across his chest, as he was merely bored. He looked as though this sort of thing happened all the time and there were no reason to be disturbed.

The ground was zooming ever closer now at an alarming rate. Despite Harry's sixth sense about everything ending well, he couldn't help but feel a little more frightened now that they were so close to

impact. He shot a worried look at Mir who still looked unfazed. He glanced carelessly at the ground, which was less than fifty metres below them now. They would hit it in seconds.

Harry closed his eyes so that he wouldn't have to watch their untimely death. The air rushing past him was speeding up now as well. He tried to bring his knees up to his chest protectively but he found this was impossible to do when falling. It was going on for so long. Why couldn't they just stop falling? He was feeling a little sick now. The ground was so close. They kept on falling. It was going on for so long. Why didn't it end? They just kept on falling. They were almost at the ground. It was going on for so long. They were still falling. The ground was looming ever nearer. They were falling for so long. And then, it stopped.

It was over. There was no bang. There was no crash. There was no pain. It just stopped. Harry tentatively opened his eyes. He was lying on the ground below the huge building, so was Mir. But where was all the pain? Why was it so smooth and painless? Why hadn't they died? Looking over at the two young men who had been holding him he saw that they were both sitting on the ground beside them, gibbering like half-wits.

There was a crowd gathering around them now. They were all muttering.

"They're alive!"

"Freaks."

"Publicity stunt."

"Crazy teens."

"What were they thinking?"

"Aliens."

"Can't be real."

"They should be dead."

“Freaks of nature.”

And so on. Harry looked up at the building from which they had fallen. The height was dizzying. By all rights they should be dead. A little head peered down over the edge of the roof.

Someone tugged at his arm. It was Mir. “Come on,” he said quietly. “We’re attracting attention.” Harry stood up with Mir and was immediately sick. Wiping his mouth he followed Mir, trying to snake his way through the crowd. More muttering followed them. As soon as they were free of the thickest parts of the crowd, they ran. They wove in and out of people and didn’t stop until they were sure that no one would link them to the falling children.

When they did stop it was in a narrow side street and they were panting.

“What – was – that?” Harry gasped.

“Who – knows,” Mir said, in between breaths. “Lets – hope – that – it – doesn’t – happen – again. You need – to learn – how to – fight.”

Harry just nodded his head slightly, clutching his side. He still felt slightly nauseous from falling.

Mir and Harry decided that it was best that they lay low for the rest of the day especially since they were already exhausted. They returned to the flat in no better condition than they had been in the previous day. This being so they decided to call it a day and rested until night at which point in time they went to bed.

When Harry woke up it was morning and the sun was already shining. He got up and groaned as once again, his muscles ached. It was a different sort of ache this time though. It wasn’t from using his muscles too much and it wasn’t from exhaustion; it was more from doing something very different. Which, Harry supposed, it had been.

He looked for Mir but he was still soundlessly asleep. Harry thought back to what he had said yesterday. “*You need to learn how to fight.*” That was true. He couldn’t leave it to Mir to bail him out of trouble all

the time. After all, Mir wasn't always going to be around. There was no telling when they would get separated. Even if he wasn't great at fighting it would still be good to know that he could try a little more successfully to defend himself. If he could distract who ever he was fighting for a moment it would be okay. He would be able to run away doing that. He was a fast runner; he knew that much. Harry had always come first in his year when they had races or sports days.

These thoughts lead Harry onto another question. How had Mir gotten away from the two boys chasing him? Had he fought them or had he managed to lose them in a crowd somewhere? He would ask him later.

Harry's stomach growled. He looked over at Mir again. Mir was still sound asleep and showing no signs of waking. Harry decided that he would surprise Mir and go out and buy some food for them. He knew where the money had been put for safekeeping. He took a little of it with him and exited the building.

Outside there were few people in the road. Harry supposed that it was still too early for most people on a Sunday morning. He hoped shops somewhere were open. He found a couple of shops that were open a few blocks away.

Upon entering the shop an assistant came over to him. "Are you okay? Are you lost? Where are your parents?"

Harry smiled, feigning innocence. "I'm okay, sir," he said in a sweet voice. "My mum asked me if I'd buy her some stuff. We live across the road there."

The assistant smiled kindly. "Okay then," he said. "What are you looking for? Maybe I can help you."

Harry thanked the man profoundly and told him what he wanted. As soon as he had paid for the food and left the shop he pulled a face. He hated having to act like that. That was like the teacher's pet in school had been. She had driven Harry insane. It was like she actually *enjoyed* school. If the teacher forgot to ask for their homework she would always remind them and as soon as anyone did

anything wrong she would immediately tell the teacher. Harry wasn't the only person she drove insane.

He returned to the flat and smiled as he saw Mir now lying on his back with his arms and legs extended in all directions and set about making breakfast for him.

When Mir finally awoke and had eaten, he instructed Harry to face him in one of the large empty rooms. "Right, punch me," he ordered.

"What? I can't do that!" Harry spluttered indignantly. He might hurt Mir and that wouldn't exactly do much for their friendship.

"Why not? Don't tell me you've never punched a guy before!" Laughter met his earlier concerns when Harry voiced them. "Just do it." Taking a deep breath, he carefully launched a punch at where he thought it would do the least damage, Mir's gut.

"You call that a punch? Here hold your hand like this, with the thumb on the outside; you'll break your bones doing it like that."

The days were flying past now. Harry and Mir managed to keep themselves busy very easily. They taught themselves (or rather Mir taught Harry) some very basic punches and kicks so that they would be able to get away from attackers fairly easily. Soon a test for such defences came and the punches and kicks were proved worth the time spent learning them. Harry found out very quickly that it was not a field of roses to live without a home. Although he was still uncomfortable with stealing he now saw it as a necessity. He had had to steal from a couple of people on his own when Mir had been busy. Doing what, Harry had no idea.

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James laughed running with all his might. It was fun to provoke local gangsters, which was exactly what he and Lewis had been doing. He had grown to love getting into fights. It was exhilarating; the thrill, the chase, the fight. James had gotten into a few fights now, mostly with older boys than he. There were surprisingly few girls to fight but if and when he came against one he swore to himself that he would show her no mercy and would not underestimate her. He knew that Lewis would go easy on a girl if ever he had to fight one. He was too soft. James recognised such things now. If you were to survive, you had to be tough, merciless and ruthless.

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Robert clutched his side in agony. Trust a policeman to pull a knife on you. It hadn't helped that he had been in another fight earlier that day as well but it wasn't his fault. The punk had tried to home in on his target when he knew that it was Roberts'. Robert always clearly marked out his next target to avoid such things. He suspected that the policeman wouldn't have been there if the punk hadn't tipped him off out of anger at being shown up by someone so small and scrawny as Robert.

Tony looked at Robert dismally. He had known this would happen. He had tried to prevent it of course but it had still happened. Robert was falling in love with the street life. He didn't care who he robbed or who he fought. He didn't care that there were people after him and was becoming reckless. Tony had known that Robert might love the street life after his dull, old life. He lived for the kill now. Tony had never thought that Robert would have become addicted so early on in life though. He had just gone nine. Tony still liked to believe that he looked out and cared for Robert even if neither admitted it. Ever since they had met it had been like that.

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There had been no sign of magical life. None whatsoever. It had been over a year now but still nothing. The magical world might not have existed at all for all Cole cared. He had seen nothing of it, heard nothing of it or felt anything of it. There would be the occasional burst of magic if he was desperately losing a fight but that was it. That hardly counted as cheating in a fight. If the other person didn't notice it wasn't cheating. Some people were so unobservant.

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It was supposed to be a simple operation. Straight in, straight out. Nothing too hard, just a simple job. There was no way anything could go wrong. It was a routine theft; an expensive looking car was found and parts were stolen off it. It had to be done quickly and silently in the dead of night so no one would see them coming or going.

Harry stole a quick glance at Mir as they waited for the signal. He had heard all about these sort of car thefts of course, but he has never been allowed to take part in one before. They had to be executed with the utmost care and skill and frankly, no one had thought Harry had been experienced enough before. Some still didn't believe that he should be a part of it but news travelled fast among the homeless and so had his reputation.

Harry had no idea what type of car the vehicle they were going to be taking the parts from was although Harry could hardly tell any cars apart from the one next to them. He had virtually no knowledge of cars. He was not so dense about cars that he didn't notice the expensive material of the seats, the quality of the bonnet and the quiet purr of the engine. The car had been under watch for days now so that when the time came to steal the parts, they knew exactly how to go about it.

"They", were the members of a street gang that Harry and Mir had become friendly with. Mir and Harry had no intentions of joining it however but it was always good to have lots of connections. It was actually quite an honour to be allowed to take part in their doings without being a member. Most of the time outsiders were assumed untrustworthy but again Harry's reputation preceded him. Harry was well known now – mostly under different names – for his stealth and his secrecy. He knew that he showed great promise as a thief and that he had a natural talent at stealing.

A car backfired in the street somewhere. Harry grinned. That was the signal. Now was his chance to finally prove to Mir that he was capable of doing things. Mir still liked to treat him as if he knew nothing and was incapable of taking care of himself. Harry quickly moved forwards and beside him Mir, Nicky, and Nymph did the same. Across the courtyard where the car was situated, he saw several other kids move towards the car as well. He quickly set to work at unscrewing the hubcaps and he was vaguely aware of the others dismantling various parts. The bonnet was being removed carefully, the engine taken, the windows slid down so that the insides could be explored.

It was all done silently as well rehearsed. There were two lookouts stationed at the entrance to the courtyard. All the goods were being carefully packaged and were given to small children standing at ready. The smallest children available were used for tasks such as these. They were generally believed no matter what they said if they were caught. They were able to fit through the smallest gaps and wriggle their way easily through crowds.

Harry finished with a hubcap and moved onto the next. See? He thought gleefully. He was just as good as anyone at this, perhaps even better. He had heard of a boy dropping a hubcap once so that the rattled all the way down the silent street until it stopped and span noisily. Nothing like that would happen tonight though. It would go perfectly and Harry would be praised for his great help later. A dull thud sounded as something hit the ground. Harry stopped unscrewing the last bolt in the hubcap and looked up alarmed. What was that?

A second thud sounded. It came from the entrance to the courtyard. It was impossible to see what had made the sound though; there were no lampposts nearby. Harry turned back to the hubcap and began unscrewing a bit more hurriedly now. He was almost done wrapping it when –

“What do you *children* think you’re doing?” a voice said with a cool calm, from behind Harry.

Harry almost dropped the hubcap in surprise. He caught it just as it was about to hit the ground. He placed it carefully beside the other one and turned around slowly. He could only see the dim outline of the man standing there. Everyone had stopped moving. They were all gazing up at the man fearfully. He had chosen his position to announce his presence well. He had somehow managed to block the only exit to the courtyard from everyone.

“I said,” the man hissed. “What do you think you are doing?”

Harry looked at the others. None of them looked as if they were about to answer the question. The man likewise, did not look as if he were going to do anything.

“What’s it to you, man?” Harry asked rudely. The others looked at him gratefully. Clearly none of them much wanted to have to stand up to this imposing man. *Bunch of wimps*, thought Harry.

“It is my car on loan from a friend,” the man replied aggressively. “A friend who I know has many *means* of dealing with thieves.”

“Stop talking bull,” Harry said confidently. There was no way that they’d even have to meet this “friend”. They had gotten out of sticky situations before and they would do it again. “You can tell your “friend”, that he can go to hell.”

The man stepped forward threateningly. “You know, I have the police on speed dial on my phone. One touch of a button and they could be here in minutes. I think you’ll find I’m in town on very important business and anyone who “interferes” will be severely punished.”

“By the time your little police buddies got here,” Harry spat back. “We will be gone.”

Mir slid over to Harry. He had been working on the bonnet and was fairly close to Harry already. He waited until the silhouette of the man looked like he wasn’t paying attention and then he said, “I have a plan.” Harry raised his eyebrows at him. He was unsure whether Mir had seen or not but listened as he heard him say, “Just keep him busy.” Mir then shuffled slowly off to tell the others what to do.

“What are you gonna do about it anyways?” Harry asked the silhouette.

“Well first of all I’m going to call the social services and if they don’t punish you, I will.” The man moved slightly in the dark. It looked like he was taking something out of his jacket but in the dim light, it was nearly impossible to tell.

Mir sidled back to Harry’s side of the car. “Yeah right,” Harry said, feigning boredom.

Before the man could reply, Mir launched himself at him and knocked him over. Everyone else sprang into action instantly. They grabbed the packages and sprinted out of the courtyard not even sparing a

glance at the two rolling on the ground. Harry grabbed his packages as well and ran to the archway that marked the entrance to the courtyard. He pulled Mir off the man and together they ran down the street in the same direction as the others had gone, laughing and shouting. There was no sign of the two lookouts.

As they were running, somewhere behind them the man shouted something in a strange language. Mir and Harry, still side by side, fell together as something unseen in the darkness tripped them up. Harry sat up confused. How had that happened? He looked back to where they had been tripped up. There was nothing there. Harry looked at Mir. He wasn't moving.

The man was running down the street towards them. There was nothing else to do. Harry would have to carry Mir and put him somewhere safe. Or... he could always try some magic but did he dare risk it with the man so close now? Yes it was the best solution. He would deal with the consequences after. He placed his hands over Mir's unconscious body and closed his eyes. Somewhere safe, thought Harry. The hut they were staying in would do. *Make Mir appear in the hut*, he thought hard. Harry opened his eyes and looked at where Mir had been only seconds before. It was becoming easier and easier to use magic now.

"Where's all your little friends now?" the man asked as he approached Harry. In a mocking tone he then said, "Did they all leave you? Aw that's a shame isn't it? All on your own now."

Harry just sat there staring hatefully up into the dark head of the man. There was no point trying to run now. For one, he doubted he could get away quickly enough. Another reason was that he was still slightly out of breath from making Mir disappear. Harry did not attempt to do magic on purpose often, but it always left him with a drained feeling, as if he had just run a few miles and stopped for a breather.

"Now I think a bit more light is in order. I want to see the face of the boy who thinks he can steal from me. Lumos!"

A bright light appeared from nowhere on the end of a stick the man was carrying. With the new found light Harry took the opportunity to

examine the street in which he was now trapped. It was a painfully dull street; every house was identical to the next, right down the identical shrubbery and well preened gardens. Occasionally one house was rebellious and instead of having red roses they would have yellow, or something similar. The only break in the monotonous repetition of houses was the large archway which led to the courtyard that was simply the same houses in a square.

The wandlight lit up the man's features in the most eerie of ways. With the assistance of the street lamps he could see the man clearly now. Still as tall and imposing as his silhouette had been, he now had an identifiable hooked nose, greasy hair and, though it was a little hard to tell in the orange lamplight, sickly sallowness. The man was tall, had a strict face (though that might have come from the fact that he had just caught some children trying to steal his car). As they both acknowledged the other's appearance they gasped.

There was only one explanation for the man's light on a stick; he was a wizard. He had to be and that would make the stick his wand. *Uh oh*, thought Harry and he hoped fervently that the man had not recognised him although there was little chance of that judging by his gasp.

"Harry Potter," the man murmured. "I thought you were dead."

"Um yeah," said Harry getting up and edging away. "So, um, I'll just be going then." He stopped in his tracks however as the wizard pointed his wand at him threateningly. Knowing there was little else he could do, Harry observed the man critically. He held himself in a self-assured, almost arrogant posture and remained cool and collected despite the fact that he had essentially just seen someone come back from the dead.

Unfortunately for Harry, making Mir disappear hadn't left him enough energy to transport himself with magic yet. It didn't take long for him to regain energy after doing magic but it would be at least another ten or fifteen minutes before he would be prepared to disappear. The man and his wand narrowed down his chances of running. There would certainly be a way of knocking him out or pinning him down with magic, no matter how fast Harry was.

“Oh I don’t think so,” he said casually. “There have been a lot of people looking for you, you know. Most assumed you were either captured or were dead but all this time, all this time, you’ve been hiding on the streets. Your fun ends here, Harry Potter. I think it’s time that you met my friend whose car it is you tried to dismantle.” And with that the man held his wand at Harry’s back and made him walk towards the courtyard again.

Harry had to do some very quick thinking. He could try and run now and risk being shot at by the dark haired wizard. Or he could go with him and try to run later, which might not be possible. Neither were particularly appealing. This wizard didn't look as if he would restrict himself to harmless curses if his determination to capture Harry was any indication. Then again, if he went with him, who was to say that he would refrain himself from cursing Harry anyway? The more he thought about it, the less he liked either option. It was run and risk being cursed, or go with him and risk being cursed. No, if he was going to run he had better do it now. As soon as Harry and the man entered the courtyard there would be no escape route. It had been the one flaw in their plan. It would be better to run now even if it put him in perfect range of the man's wand/ The worst that would happen would be getting caught while trying to run; even though the wizard was clearly wanting to curse him, Harry probably wouldn't be *seriously* injured, not after the wizarding world had been looking for him for so long. If he was caught again, he would probably just be sent to the same place anyway. Harry glanced behind him at the tall man who was walking with an air of superiority.

They were almost at the courtyard. It was now or never. Harry kicked blindly behind him and the man doubled over in pain for a split second. That was all it took for Harry to run with all his might towards one end of the street. The wizard was quick to fire spells after him and Harry heard him shouting more nonsense words and saw flashes of light as the spells missed him in his zig zagging path. He dove towards an alley at the end of the street for shelter and the wizard followed. It was a narrow alley with little room for maneuvering which meant that more than once Harry had to flatten himself against a wall while running to avoid curses that were still being fired like a machine gun firing bullets at him. At the far end of the alley there were some large bins blocking the exit and as he neared them, Harry jumped as high as he could to get over or onto them. He heard a gasp from below him. Wait, below him? Harry looked down only to realise that he was on top of a sloping roof of one of the nearby houses and that the man was gazing up at him in surprise. Harry swayed slightly. He was on the edge of the roof and even though the magic was

unintentional, it still made him feel slightly faint to be doing it so soon after his magic on Mir. He gulped and staggered back a few steps up the slope. He didn't want to risk falling off.

Harry knew that the man would have trouble following him now and it would take him at least a few minutes to find the way up. By the time he managed that Harry would be long gone. Harry guessed he knew the streets better than almost anyone else now. He loved to go exploring during the daytime when it was vital that he wasn't seen. This being the case, he knew nearly every secret passageway in the immediate vicinity. The only problem was that Harry was not sure where exactly he was. He knew of course, that he was on a rooftop but he wasn't sure which house on which street it was. He decided that no matter what direction he went in was fine as long as it didn't lead him into the hands of the opposition. Looking at the surrounding roofs and chimneys he tried to judge which one was the closest. He chose one to the left and ran towards the gap between them. He only just managed to stay on the roof after sliding down a few feet after he launched himself at it. He collapsed as he landed and sat panting for a moment. He hated heights.

A loud crack cut the silence of the night like a knife. Harry spun around horror stricken. Surely the wizard hadn't found a way up so soon? He saw a dim outline on the opposite chimney. Of course! Wizards would surely know how to teleport if he could. What was he to do now? However fast Harry ran, he was sure the man would catch up... unless Harry took him by surprise. If he did something very unexpected he would buy a few more minutes. Harry gulped. He had to trust his magic a lot this time. He waved cheerfully to the roof opposite and, shaking violently, got up and launched himself off of the opposite side of the roof.

Harry closed his eyes, not wishing to experience the long, terrifying decent which he was sure would kill him this time. Memories threatened to engulf him as he remembered his last flight off a building. Memories that haunted his dreams. The air rushing around him stopped abruptly. He didn't bother opening his eyes, he just crouched on the ground trembling. He hated heights.

When he did open his eyes Harry found that he was not at the foot of a block of flats like he had expected but he was in the hut in which he and Mir were currently staying. It was just that, a hut. Plain and empty with only a few blankets for bedding, the hut didn't even have a window, just four walls and a door. He looked round at the empty room. Something was amiss. Mir! Where was he? This was where Harry had sent him, he was sure, so where was he? He rushed out of the hut but there was no sign of Mir. He then proceeded to run the two blocks of run down shops and high rising flats and several back alleys to where the gang that had organised the car theft, resided. Surely Mir would go there after waking up in the hut? Harry rushed into the gang's lair, ignoring the knives and daggers that raised automatically to ward him off, and said breathlessly,

"Has – Mir – been – round – here?"

The gang's lair was similarly furnished to the hut; blankets were strewn everywhere, a couple of moth-eaten sofas, a well-controlled fire burned in the center of the room shrouding the ceiling in smoke and empty bottles and rubbish was seen a-plenty no matter which direction you looked in.

Nymph scooted over on the holey sofa she and a couple of others were occupying to make room for him to sit down. She offered him some of whatever it was she was drinking and, putting her knife away, said "Yeah, sure. He were round here 'bout ten minutes ago. Rushed off real quick though. Summit about you getting' caught an' we told him that t'weren't possible but he don' listen do he? Anyways park it here an' you can have some celebratory gin."

Harry declined politely and ran out of the lair, cursing under his breath. He ran a distracted hand through his short hair. He would have to go back to the courtyard now. Mir would have run off assuming that Harry had been caught. This thought angered Harry somewhat; even though he had just saved him from the wizard that had caught *Mir* not him, Mir still thought that Harry couldn't take care of himself. Hadn't he proven himself? How much did it take to show people that you weren't weak? Ignoring these thoughts he sprinted as fast as he could in the direction of the courtyard, knowing that the wizard was most likely waiting there for him especially if he had caught Mir.

Fool, Harry thought to himself. He was so predictable; Mir would obviously be used as bait to lure him to the courtyard and here he was doing exactly what the dark man expected of him.

As soon as Harry neared the courtyard, he slowed down to a walk. The main reason for doing this was to formulate a plan as he could not expect to be able to walk in unnoticed. Another reason for slowing was so that he could check the state of affairs and the other reason was so that he could catch his breath. Inside the courtyard were the wizard and Mir.

The wizard was holding Mir to the side by his arm. The only position, Harry noted with glee, that Mir couldn't kick him from. Harry was please to see that the oaf had learnt his lesson. The man was shaking Mir and questioning him roughly.

"Where is your friend boy?" was the question he repeated the most to which Mir kept replying,

"Which friend?" which got the reply of,

"You know who I mean. The Potter boy!" At this Mir would ask,

"What do you want from me?" which would start the questions all over again. Harry watched them do this a few times but the wizard grew annoyed after repeating himself a couple of times. As he grew more and more frustrated, Harry could see his grip on Mir's arm tightening as if the small amount of pain were going to make the slightest difference.

"Well if you're not going to tell me then I suppose I'll have to take you with me instead and you can explain it to the owner of this car." Here the man shook Mir roughly. The deathgrip with which he was now holding Mir would be hard to break even if Harry were to run at him full-throttle.

Mir looked up at him defiantly. Sighing, he said with his fakest innocent voice that was clearly mocking, "I dunno where he is. *Sorry.*"

The man almost exploded in anger. It would, Harry mused, be quite amusing if he did. Face contorted in rage, somehow his grip tightened

even further on Mir into what was definately a very painful hold. He made a growling sort of sound and looked as if he were going to hit Mir. Harry thought it was best he intervened.

“I’m behind you,” he shouted into the echoing courtyard. He smirked to himself in the darkness. This would be fun. He could really mess with their heads by doing this; there was no way to tell where he was. It had once happened to him. A rival gang to one he had been assisting had ambushed them in a dark shadowy courtyard. Each had called tauntingly at them making it appear that their numbers were twice over. Of course, Harry being the genius that he was, had borrowed knives of his companions and sent many spinning off in every direction as he whirled round in a circle whilst throwing them. That had been the end of that rivarly.

The man spun around alarmed until he was facing the completely wrong direction, dragging Mir with him. He still refused to let go of the struggling Mir. “Show yourself Harry Potter.”

Harry waited a few seconds as if contemplating it then said, “Why should I?” He felt like picking up a stone to throw at the wall to confuse the wizard. Unable to resist this urge, he did so.

The wizard spun around again as the stone his the wall to his left, still not facing Harry, and let out a growl of frustration. “Argh-“

“Argh?” Harry asked barely containing his laughter. “What are you a pirate?”

Ignoring this, the man hissed at him rather like a snake. “If you don’t show yourself this *instant*, Potter, then I will inflict such pain unto your friend that he will be screaming for mercy and it will be *your* fault.” He raised his wand and pointed it at Mir’s chest as if to emphasise this point.

Did he think Harry was completely stupid? Obviously if the man did such a thing Harry would be less inclined to show himself and the man might lose his bargaining chip. Only complete idiots would fall for such a blatant ploy. Harry told him as much.

"I suppose you think you're pretty clever?" the man asked with more than a hint of a sneer in his voice. "It's not enough to be famous for you, the great Harry Potter. You have to distract everyone in the wizarding community from their jobs to look for you, a worthless spoilt brat. You just can't stay out of the spotlight can you? Well then, if you're not going to show yourself to help your little friend then I suppose I *will* take him instead. That'll be a story to tell the wizarding world won't it? Harry Potter is too arrogant and conceited that he won't even save his friends. He only cares for himself."

That did the trick. Something in Harry snapped and even in the black night he saw red. He didn't care about his position any more. Flinging himself at the back of the wizard he sent them both to the ground. Somewhere in the tangle of arms and legs the wizard had let go of Mir and could only lie on the ground for a moment as Harry began to punch his face with all his might. The man quickly regained his sense and pulled his wand on Harry who was then sent flying across the courtyard and then slammed into one of the walls with a ghastly sounding *crack*. Harry couldn't move. He could barely breath. He could only sit against the wall, pain spiralling up his back, as the man came over to him, breathing heavily.

"Make no mistake you will *not* be getting away this time," sneered the man. He said something in gibberish and long ropes flew out of his wand and wrapped themselves around Harry. Pain flared up in almost every part of his body. "You're lucky that your friend isn't joining you. If he were more than a common street rat then he would be." Harry looked past the man and saw a dark heap lying across the courtyard, unmoving. A flash of anger seared through him. It was all very well for the wizard to injure Harry, after all he had just sent him to the ground where he had proceeded to give him a burst lip, cracked hooked nose and the beginnings of a black eye, but the wizard had no right to attack Mir who was, mostly, an innocent bystander. The wizard flicked his wand and he and Harry disappeared in a whirl of colours.

When they reappeared they were in a room so brightly white in contrast to the dark night that they had been in just moments before, that it stung Harry's eyes to look around him. He finally got a good look at the wizard. He was somewhat vampire-like and had indeed

sickly sallow skin. His face was leering which only added to his vampire-like look along with the blood trickling down his chin. There was a large bruise around his left eye where Harry had hit him and there were several cuts and tears in his long black robes. How Harry hadn't noticed the fact that he wasn't wearing normal clothes was beyond him. To top it off his hair was sleek and greasy. All in all he was a very foreboding man.

A strict but kind looking nurse bustled into the room and dropped whatever vial she was holding in surprise. "My word Severus! What ever happened to you? Come lie on this bed immediately and I'll take a look at you."

'Severus' shook his head. "No," he said. "I need to speak to the headmaster. It's urgent."

Upon hearing the word headmaster Harry realised that this must be a magic school and that the headmaster must be the one that his aunt had told him about so very long ago. He struggled against the bindings to get free, wincing at the pain. This attracted the attention of the nurse who dropped the vial she had just picked up.

She paled drastically. "Merlin's beard!" she cried. "It can't be... It's not... Is that Harry Potter?"

Harry glared at the nurse and muffled something through his gag. He hoped that she would take the hint and take it off him. His binds were cutting into his skin, barely refraining from drawing blood. Unfortunately before the nurse could do anything "Severus" spoke.

"Get the headmaster." It was clear that he was in a state of forced calm.

The nurse looked ready to have a nervous break down. "B-but if that's... Harry Potter! He's tied up? Who did this to you? We must see to his injuries!" She was rambling now and Harry realised that he would get no assistance from her. She was obviously a friend of some sort to the wizard in black not to mention she was becoming more than a little hysterical which, Harry couldn't help thinking, was very unprofessional.

"Get the headmaster *now!*" Severus turned towards Harry as the nurse shuffled out the room muttering fervently. "Now you will not speak of anything that happened tonight. I will tell the story without your interruption and you will go along with everything I say. Got that?"

If he could have spoken through his gag, he would have sworn at him. Severus had some nerve. First he attacked him and Mir, then he had the audacity to expect him to do what he wanted? Harry glared at him and struggled some more against his bindings. Severus gave a flick of his wand and the gag disappeared. "Got that?" he repeated threateningly. Harry spat at his face and was about to reply when the door burst open revealing an old man standing there. He had a long silver beard and twinkling blue eyes, which were hiding behind half moon spectacles. His eyes gave him a slight maddening look.

"Is he here? You found him?" he spoke very quickly, almost desperately. He scanned the room frantically and finally his eyes rested upon Harry who was trying to shrink away from him but failing miserably. "Harry my boy!" the old man exclaimed. "What has happened to you? What has happened to you? We're so fortunate that Severus managed to rescue you! But, why, you're all tied up!" He

pulled a long wooden wand out of his long robes and was about to give it a wave when Severus interrupted.

"I don't think that's wise, Headmaster," he said, his lip curling. "Potter is not safe."

"Nonsense," the old man said. "Harry is but a child. He could not possibly be a danger to anyone," and leaving no room for argument, he gave a wave of his wand and the ropes binding Harry fell away.

Harry leapt to his feet instantly. Severus would pay for taking Harry there, oh yes. Harry would make sure of that. He pulled a thin blade out from his pocket. He had never had cause to use it before but he decided that now was the time he would put it to use. Before anyone could say or do anything Harry had launched himself at Severus again but Severus had been anticipating an attack such as this and quickly raised a shield to protect himself. The only flaw was that Severus had not known Harry had a knife on him. Harry threw the knife at him but it missed by several inches or so and went skidding across the surgically white floor. He dove after it and not stopping as he picked it up, ran behind one of the beds. Wands from Severus and the wizened old man were raised at him. Rather than hold his knife out as a threat, Harry raised the shining blade to his own throat as a warning, knowing very well that this would have a much better effect.

"Now Harry," the old man said gently. "Put the knife down. We aren't here to hurt you we're here to help."

It took all of Harry's strength to resist throwing the knife at him. Who was he to tell him what to do? It was clear to Harry that he was the manipulative man whom he had heard so much about before Aunt Petunia died. "Who the hell are you?" Harry asked. It would do well to know his name even if he couldn't speak it for fear of someone nearby hearing and reporting to him. If he was going to find a way to escape he would have to know everything he could about everything.

"I am Professor Dumbledore, Harry, and this is Professor Snape," he indicated Severus. "And this is Madam Pomfrey." He indicated the nurse who was still gibbering slightly. "If you just hand the knife to us, we can help you. Harming yourself won't solve anything."

Harry sneered. "Snape?" he laughed. "Isn't that a town somewhere? Oh yeah now I remember. Bad sewage there." He didn't move the knife. His arm was throbbing slightly from holding it there but that didn't matter now.

Snape made a noise somewhere between a growl and a howl of fury. "Potter, give us the knife now or I'll make you."

Dumbledore looked at Snape warningly. "Now, now Severus. It won't do us any good to be rash." He turned back to Harry who was silently edging towards the window. "Okay Harry," he said in a caring tone. "You can keep your knife just take it away from your throat and everything will be alright."

Harry froze enraged. "Why should I? What have you ever done for me?" He knew full well what Dumbledore had done. He had sent an innocent man to prison, set his parents up for death and had Aunt Petunia killed!

"I placed you into the care of your aunt but I see now that that was a mistake. She wasn't of sound mind. I also sent many skilled witches and wizards out to find you and look! It paid off. Soon you will be able to lead a nice normal life away from the horrors which you have experienced this past year." He raised a wrinkled hand out for Harry to take. "I mean you no harm Harry."

"Liar!" Harry hissed venomously. He couldn't believe the nerve of this man. "My aunt had nothing wrong with her! You killed her. She was trying to protect me! From you! How dare you claim you sent people to find me? Didn't do a very thorough job did they? Can't have tried very hard could you? Didn't tell you how he found me did he?" Harry pointed at Snape. "Didn't tell you that when he found me he tried to kill me, did he? Didn't tell you that he tried to *murder* my friend? Liar!" Harry found that once he had started saying everything that had been bottled up inside of him for so long that it was very hard to stop. He hated Dumbledore with all his being. "Maybe I didn't want to be found. Ever think of that? Maybe I was happy, away from *you*."

Dumbledore looked at Snape alarmed. "Is this true?" he asked.

Snape sent Harry a glare so fierce that most men would have shrunk back under it. Harry however, stood tall and proud, the knife still pressed against his throat. "Of course it's not!" he spat. "I simply stunned his friend and was attempting to do the same to Potter but *someone* kept jumping off of buildings and running away."

"But Severus," Dumbledore said slowly. "Why were you attempting to stun them in the first place? Surely it would have been more sensible to ask them nicely rather than scare them half to death."

"I didn't know it was Potter until after he ran from me," Snape sighed. "I found him because he and some of his little friends were trying to steal *your* car." He handed the keys back to Dumbledore who raised his eyebrows at Harry.

Harry took a step away from them. "So what if I was? It don't matter. The point is I ain't staying here. Least of all with you," he pointed the knife at Dumbledore.

"I'm sorry then Harry," said the old man sadly. "But I can't let you leave. It's a dangerous world out there and much more so for you. We can't afford to lose you again. There are dangers that you couldn't possibly know of."

"I've seen plenty of dangers. I'd rather face them all again if it were a choice between you or them."

"I'm so sorry Harry." Dumbledore pointed his wand towards Harry and cried, "Stupefy!"

A beam of red light soared towards Harry's chest. *I can't stay here, thought Harry. I need to see if Mir's okay. It's my fault if he's not. I put him in danger. I'm going to get out of here if it's the last thing I do.* And the beam of light hit Harry square in the chest and the last thing he saw before all went black was the sorrowful face of Dumbledore, the glaring face of Snape and the uneasy face of Madam Pomfrey.

When Harry awoke, there was a small sliver of silver light shining on his face. It was moonlight shining through a small window in the room. By the little light, Harry could see that he was still in the hospital room. There was no sign of the wizards. Looking round the room Harry saw that it was in fact empty. He tried to get up but as he moved he felt ropes tying his wrists and ankles to the bed, which he was lying on. He struggled against the binds for a few moments before giving up completely. The ropes were tied expertly and were very tight.

“Dumbledore!” he yelled. There was silence. “Snape!” he tried shouting again. Again there was silence. His voice seemed hardly to carry at all. For all Harry knew the room could be soundproof though. He decided that seeing as they couldn’t hear him he might as well swear at them. Harry began to curse violently. He cursed Dumbledore, Snape and the whole wizarding world. Still no one came. The silence was deafening.

Quickly realising that he was accomplishing nothing, Harry soon gave up shouting; there was no point in wasting his voice on them. He looked towards the ropes. If it hadn’t been real it could have been a scene from a movie, Harry thought. The lighting looked very surreal and the ropes seemed to glow as they reflected the moonlight. The sky outside was cloudless and the moon was full.

How would he get out? Now that was a problem. No doubt the wizards would have taken his knife. Even if he had it with him he would have no way of reaching it. If he strained his neck Harry could just reach the ropes on his arms with his mouth. But what good was that? There was no way he could untie them. Harry smiled in the dark.

A while later, Harry had no idea how long, his arm flopped to his side in relief. The bitten rope fell to the floor in a heap and Harry spat out the remains. That had been horrible. He had *chewed* his way through a rope which must have been a good inch or two thick. Harry felt rather proud of himself. Even Mir would have had to praise that stunt.

He reached down with his free arm and felt about in his pocket. Empty. Yes they had taken his knife. He stretched his arm as far as it

would go, tugging on the rope still holding his other arm. It reached just to his knee. Harry sighed and turned to untie the rope holding his left arm with his free one. The knot held strong. He cursed some more and began to bite at the strap.

After another long session of chewing – which left Harry's teeth very sore – he sat up stretching to loosen his muscles. They creaked and groaned as he did so. He then reached down his leg again and pulled up his trouser leg to reveal a thin blade glinting in the moonlight. Harry grinned. Some people were too trusting. The smart thing would have been to check him for more weapons before tying him down but no; they weren't intelligent enough for that. After withdrawing the knife and cutting the bindings around his legs, Harry stood up and faced the window.

There was bound to be spells around the window or defences to stop him escaping through it. Perhaps if he went too near he would turn into a frog or something. There was a wooden chair beside one of the beds near the one Harry had been on. He picked it up and, standing as far back from the window as possible, threw the chair as hard as he could so that it collided against the glass. It bounced off and fell to the ground with a clatter. Okay, Harry thought. They have anti-breaking windows, no big deal. He went over to the window and tried to open it by the handle. It didn't budge. Maybe the catch was rusty. He put all of his strength into turning the handle. It slowly turned. Smiling at his luck, Harry pushed the window with just as much effort. It opened an inch and then refused to budge.

Harry kicked the chair in frustration and swore. He turned to the door and tugged at it hopelessly. It too did not budge. A quick scan of the room confirmed that there were no visible means of escape. Well, if he couldn't escape he might as well trash the place. Deciding upon this Harry went round the perfect room and wrecked or broke what ever he could. He tore the curtains, ripped the bed sheets, slashed the empty portrait, broke the ornaments, threw the chairs across the room (he first tried to break them but finding this too difficult Harry settled for throwing them) and tore the candleholders from the wall. His job complete he slid under one of the beds where he would be well hidden from view should anyone enter the room (the torn sheets still hung low to the ground and provided sufficient screens).

Harry lay there for hours. He had stashed his knife back into its holder and was bored out of his mind as he lay on the cold stone floor. He had no view of anything other than the underside of the bed, which was lit up by the moonlight that persistently shone through the sheets. There were only so many comfortable positions that Harry could take on the floor. He quickly ran out and spent most of his time there turning over and wriggling. By the time the door did open however, Harry was cold and sore.

The door handle turned slowly and grave footsteps sounded as someone entered the once pristine room. "Harry, my boy," a familiar voice said sadly. "What do you hope to achieve from this?" When Harry remained silent he continued. "Surely you must know that no good can come of this? You must realise that your aunt was not of sound mind when she told you what she did."

Under the bed Harry bristled slightly. How dare he? Even when they were alone Dumbledore continued with his lies. More footsteps entered the room to join Dumbledore's.

"Close the door behind you Severus," Dumbledore sighed. He sounded weary, defeated almost. "We would not want Mr Potter to escape." His orders were obeyed obediently. "We know you are in here Harry. There are no means to exit this room. Can't you see what the Deatheaters are trying to do to you? Oh where did I go so wrong?"

Harry had two options. He could stay under the bed until they forced him to go out or he could leave on his own terms. What could they do to him? There was no one left for them to hurt near him. There was only him. Harry slid out from under the bed and turned towards Dumbledore and Snape. He refused to make eye contact with either of them in case they tried to read his mind. Instead he looked just to the side of them. "If Aunt Petunia was under a spell by Deatheaters, why did they try and pin me against themselves also?" He almost smiled at his intellect. It was a fair point he made.

Snape took a step towards him. "Well it's obvious to anyone who isn't a *dunderhead* Potter. They were clearly trying to cover their tracks and make sure that you did not suspect them of such."

Harry had no answer to that. He still didn't believe it; for all he knew Snape could be saying that to make him trust them. Thinking about it, he found that he could pretend to believe Snape so that they would think that they had finally convinced him that Death Eaters had control of his aunt and that he, Harry, had decided to join the "light" even though he had done no such thing. Or he could act like he didn't believe them but do it badly so they thought that he was trying to cover his tracks and that he actually did believe them but he didn't want them to know that. The more he thought about it the more Harry's head began to spin. The further his thoughts travelled the more elaborate the plans became. After a few agonising moments of silence (which Snape and Dumbledore could assume were Harry contemplating what Snape had said) Harry decided on what he would do.

"Well Harry?" Dumbledore asked gently.

Harry stared despondently at the wall behind him. He made no sign that he had even heard the old fool.

"Harry?" Dumbledore asked again. Still he did not move. "Harry are you okay?"

When he did not say anything Snape spat, "Potter stop being desolate and answer the question."

Silence.

Snape took a threatening step towards him. "Severus," Dumbledore warned. "Go get Poppy, I think there may be something wrong." Snape turned on his heel and left leaving just the two of them. "Harry," Dumbledore said slowly and clearly. "Can you hear me, son?"

Inwardly Harry congratulated himself. This wasn't quite what he had planned but it would do. Originally he was going to wait for one of them to approach him so he could attack them but this would work much better. He hadn't expected them to jump to such conclusions but he was sure he could work them to his advantage. If they chose to believe there was something wrong with him, so be it. He would act like a good little puppy and not disobey them. He wouldn't try to

destroy anything and he wouldn't try to escape. All he had to do was get outside.

The door opened and Snape and the nurse came hurriedly through. Immediately the nurse started to check him over. She checked his pupils, his reflexes and his hearing amongst other things. Harry made sure that he made no movement. All the time Dumbledore and Snape were watching serenely.

After checking everything she could think of the nurse stepped back and picked up a clipboard. "I've never seen a case like this but I have heard of it," she said, scribbling on the clipboard with a quill. "His reflexes seem in tact and his hearing is fine. The eyes are being unresponsive though. Either he is deliberately ignoring you – due to the circumstances I feel that this is highly unlikely. If anything he would be extremely responsive and argumentative but he's not. The other possible explanation is that he has gone into, what is called, Cerebral Incogitable Syndrome, which is where the brain suffers from a form of cessation after an immense shock. The brain stops functioning properly leaving the patient with no acknowledgement of his or her surroundings. He will also have little memory of anything and will be unresponsive for some time. Unfortunately there is no medication to help Cerebral Incogitable Syndrome but with the right therapy measures he will recover in a few weeks time."

"So you're telling us," Snape said slowly after the diagnosis. "That Potter is in denial?"

The nurse glared at him. "He is not in denial. He is suffering from Cerebral Incogitable Syndrome and is not to have any harassment of *any kind*." She looked sternly between Dumbledore and Snape as she said this.

Inside Harry was jumping for joy. Things couldn't be going any better. Eventually they would have to let him outside where it wouldn't be too difficult to run for it.

Snape looked scathingly at Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey. It was clear he believed none of this. "Potter is *not* suffering from Cerebral Incogitable Syndrome. It is clear that he is feigning it. Watch." And to emphasise his point Snape lunged suddenly forwards at Harry as if to startle him. Harry, who had been expecting this, made a great effort of doing nothing except blinking slowly. Snape composed himself again and folded his arms. Watching him out of the corner of his eye Harry saw that he looked remarkably like an overgrown bat.

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows at Snape. "Even you, Severus, cannot put this down to feigning. No boy could feign this." He looked at Harry sadly. He almost sneered in return.

"Right both of you, out! I will not have you disturbing my patient any more." Madam Pomfrey herded the two wizards out and turned back to Harry. Soothingly she said, "Come on then Harry. You just lie down here and rest for a while." And she guided him gently over to the bed like she would a small child and helped lie him down upon it. She then bustled out of the room, locking the door behind her.

It was now light outside but Harry decided to do nothing for a while in case he was being watched; you never knew what wizards would get up to. The time he lay there for gave him opportunity to think more carefully about, well, everything. It was strange how there seemed to be a disease for what Harry had been doing. He was just going to ignore them until they cracked and left him alone or until they let him out of the hospital room. He had surmised that eventually they would let their guard down and carelessly not watched him vigilantly enough and left the door open or something like that. It was as if fate wanted him to get away. Now all he had to do was play along with being ill and inevitably he would be taken outside for fresh air. He would be a good little boy at first and not try anything, to gain their trust. After a few times of being outside he was sure they would not watch his every move and would turn away for a second at some point. As soon as they did such was when he would run. They would never suspect a thing.

Lying on the hospital bed Harry grew very stiff. It felt like he was lying on the cold floor again. Eventually he grew bored of lying on the bed. Being watched or not he could not force himself to lie on the bed a moment longer. This being the case Harry got up slowly (it simply would not do to act normal if indeed he was being watched) and went to the windowsill where he sat for a good while after.

All was silent in the large grounds. It seemed, to Harry, that they stretched on for acres and acres, which could possibly be true. The grass swayed gently from side to side as a gentle wind blew them in the morning sun. There was a large glittering lake – bigger than any Harry had seen in his life before and any bigger he was sure it would be classified as an ocean – which lay untouched like a picture on a postcard. There was a wooden hut in the extensive grounds and many greenhouses were just in view. There was only one other thing which Harry could see, a large forest. This was no ordinary forest he saw though. It was a vast hollow of dark and despair, a haunting place of no return. There was something alluring about that dark forest though. Something which seemed to call to Harry. He yearned to go there. To explore it's many trees. To find out all the secrets of it. Harry could find no explanation for this longing but simply put it down to the forest being magical. He decided that when he ran that would be where he would go.

The door opened with a creak and Harry quickly wiped his face of all emotion. The door closed again. There was no movement behind him but Harry felt sure there was a slight gust of air as if someone had walked towards him. The silence thickened all around him.

"You want to be free don't you?" a mellow voice said, making Harry jump in fright. He spun around in alarm forgetting everything about being ill. To his great surprise there was no one there. The room suddenly turned icy cold and Harry's breath rose in a mist before him. Even the sun seemed to feel it and it dimmed throwing the room into darkness.

"Your plan will work don't worry," the voice whispered from behind him. It seemed unnaturally loud for a whisper. Harry turned round to face the source but there was only the window. "We can't trust them here, no. We must escape. If you let me, I can help you." Harry

turned round once more but as he did so he tripped and fell to the floor, panting slightly. A pale hand reached from the darkness and offered itself to Harry. As it did so however, the light returned to the room like they would in a dark cinema theatre and the hand merged into that of a nurse.

Madam Pomfrey helped Harry up who made no move of objection. He was too busy scanning the room. Though the room had returned to natural temperature, Harry still breathed hard, his whole body frozen. There was nobody else in the room.

Where had that voice come from? Why had the room gone cold? Where had the nurse come from? What had just happened? *Had* that even happened? Perhaps this had been some clever ploy of Dumbledore's to force him to reveal himself as perfectly healthy. Maybe. Doubt filled his entire body and millions of questions raced through Harry's mind as the nurse buzzed around him like a bee at work.

Somewhere else in the castle, a glass skull lay shattered on the floor.

Harry had been visited no more from the voice in the dark and soon he began to wonder whether it had been real or if he had fallen asleep and dreamt it. The encounter was so strange to begin with that it could very well have been a dream but for the fact that it felt so real to Harry.

He had not been visited by anyone but Madam Pomfrey during the two days he had been in the hospital so far. Each time he made a great effort to be looking out of the window when she entered and each time she would gently take him away from it and test his reflexes and such. She continued to treat him like a small child still, which Harry found was becoming more and more irritating. It was all he could do to prevent himself from shouting at her and blowing his cover. Harry still could not understand how they could be falling for such a simple act. He wasn't even a good actor.

The days passed painfully slow in the ward. The only thing to do was sit and look out the window. Harry found out – from hours of sitting - that the hut in the ground housed a large bulky man who, each day, did some gardening in the large patch behind his house and then proceeded to travel out of the windows sight with his equally large dog.

Nothing entered or left the dark forest save some birds, which Harry assumed nested there. The strange lure to the forest was still there. If forests could speak Harry was sure this one would be quietly calling his name constantly. But forests couldn't speak and it didn't vocally call his name. It was on his third day in the hospital ward that Harry was allowed to venture outside.

Madam Pomfrey finally decided that Harry would be safe enough in the grounds and badly needed fresh air. "It will do you no good to be sitting in here cooped up all the time. Growing boys need exercise!" And so it came to pass that Harry was to be allowed outside once a day. On the first day he monitored his surroundings and watched carefully what the nurse did. If he was to escape he would need to be aware of *everything*. On the second day he was allowed out for an

hour which he spent lazing in the summer sun, gaining the trust of the nurse. It was on the third day of going outside (his fifth since his captivity began) that it happened.

Harry decided that today was going to be the day he ran. He was biding his time, waiting until Madam Pomfrey turned away but she was watching him like a hawk its prey. He was itching to go into the forest. It called to him stronger than ever when he was this close to it and he yearned to go to its call. It's like being in a sweet shop with no money, Harry thought miserably. You can see the sweets but you can't get them. A cloud drifted in front of the scorching sun, dimming it's light. That's when he heard it.

"Go. Go now. She won't notice. The forest is waiting," the voice whispered in Harry's ear. He looked up at the great forest. Everything else faded out of reality. There was only Harry and the forest. "Go," the voice urged. And then it yelled so loudly that the nurse was sure to have heard. "Go!"

And Harry went. He ran with all his might towards that vast wood. Nothing else mattered now. Only the forest. It drew ever nearer and soon Harry reached its borders. He stopped suddenly too afraid to enter its great entity. What horrors would await him in the clearly forbidden trees?

"Go," the voice repeated softly. "We will be well protected there. Far away from *them*."

Harry took a deep breath and took the last step before he was in the shelter of the trees. The only light now was from the path ahead. He would have stood there entranced for much longer but a shout sounded from behind him and it spurred him into motion like a horse at the sound of a whip. He started running frantically onwards; jumping over rocks, darting between trees, ducking low hanging branches. He paid no heed to the path and ran in any direction. He dodged behind a particularly large fir tree and past the boulder behind it. A root snagged at his foot and he stumbled to the ground, falling on his leg at an awkward angle.

Harry scrambled backwards against a tree and gazed around at the identical trees. The strange allure had gone now. It was like waking

up from a strange dream only now the forest seemed foreboding. Tree branches reached out for him, trying to catch him. Shapes lunged at him from the dark behind each tree and little light hit the forest floor; it was all caught in the canopy of branches above. He tried to stand up but pain filled his leg as he moved it.

“Get up,” the strange voice commanded strangely enough from behind Harry still even though there was tree currently occupying that space.

“But it hurts!” Harry gasped, gingerly trying to move his leg.

The voice spoke again. “Ignore the pain. It does not matter now.”

“Who are you?” Harry knew from experience that all voices must have a source. This being the case the voice could not be without a body. Unless it was a ghost, but what would a ghost want with him?

“It matters not! All will be revealed in time.”

“But what will I call you?”

There was a moment of silence and then, “Anything you wish.”

Harry pondered for a moment. What could you call a strange voice the owner of which you had never met? “How about... Sir?”

The voice sounded pleased. “Sir it shall be. Now get up!”

Somehow Harry managed to get up and limp further into the forest. He found a place to spend the night (it was indeed getting dark now) behind a large pile of boulders. It was here he had a very peculiar dream.

xXxXxX

Harry was walking in a large grassy meadow and the sun was bearing down upon him. A shadow passed overhead and a bird landed in front of him, its wing bent backwards. He bent down to pick it up to see if he could help but as he lifted it up it began to change in his hands. It began to grow. The birds' body twisted and bulged as it

changed in shape and size. Soon a large cloaked person towered over Harry and reached out a black arm.

“Follow,” the thing rasped, its voice hoarse. And it said, a little louder this time again, “Follow!”

Harry backed away terrified. What was this monster? He shook his head. It would be suicide to follow a thing like that.

The creature took a step towards him. “Follow!” it wheezed with a little more force. It continued to advance on him.

Harry turned on his heel and ran, trying to get away from the veiled monster. He ran past the long grass and out of the field but the nightmare followed him still. He ran on until he could run no more and he found himself in a vast space with naught but the ground and sky anywhere in sight. Save the hooded creature that glided evenly towards him with no effort.

“Follow!” it wheezed yet again.

Harry tried to step away from it but he bumped into something behind him. Slowly he turned to see what awaited him there. Hundreds of hooded figures stood there, each one calling out the same thing to him. “Follow! Follow!” Their putrid breath was breathed on his face, on his back all around him. One of the creatures leaned towards him until its face was just an inch away. Harry would finally be able to see inside the hood; its breath was even more rancid this close.

Harry woke up, shaking. He kept his eyes closed, trying to make the horrible vision of those hooded figures leave his mind. Even now the nightmare was over he could still see them, calling to him, feel their breath on his face.

That was odd, he could smell something other than the horrible breath of the creatures now. It smelt strangely like wet dog. Harry unwillingly opened his eyes. A huge bear-sized animal was standing over him, fangs showing, eyes gleaming. It had long fur which was ragged and uneven. It stared hungrily at Harry. It was a wolf.

Two things happened at once. Harry yelled loudly and scrambled out from under the wolf and the wolf snapped its jaws at where Harry's head had been a split second before. The wolf snarled and lunged forwards baring its large teeth. He jumped back just missing having his leg bitten by the beast. He continued to move away from the beast but his back hit something solid. Images from his dream passed in front of his eyes and he turned to look at what he had walked into. It was the large boulders that he had sheltered behind.

Those few seconds Harry had been distracted the wolf made its move. It leaped forwards and sank its razor sharp teeth into his arm. He was blinded with pain. He yelled at the top of his lungs, tears stung in his eyes and he tried to tear his arm free but the wolf, being almost the same size as Harry, did not let go and held strong. In fact, the wolf tugged harder because of it and tried to tear the arm free. Harry howled in pain.

"Please! Please!" he cried struggling against the wolf. "Someone please! Help! Please help! Anyone! Oh gods, help! Sir! Sir help! Please!"

Harry fell too his knees; the pain was too much. He couldn't bear it. His strength was beginning to fail him. He sobbed, feebly trying to fend off the beast. The wolf changed its grip on his arm ever so slightly and the pain enhanced. It walked backwards and Harry fell on his stomach. He held his arm whimpering. The wolf dragged him backwards and shook its head trying to dislodge the arm. An arrow flew down sharply and just missed the wolf. It dropped Harry's arm in surprise.

He curled up in a ball and cradled his arm, whimpering as more arrows arrived and the wolf was sent scampering. He didn't acknowledge the presence of a wise creature, half horse, half man, who stood in front of him looking down wistfully. Harry gave one last shudder, and all went dark.

Harry woke up and gazed around, discombobulated. He was in a small clearing lying on a pile of surprisingly comfortable leaves. Memories came flooding back and hit him full force. The wolf, pain, his arm. His arm! There was no pain now though. He looked down

and gasped. Right where his arm should be was a wooden model of an arm. Its size perfect, its movement acute. Where was he? How had he survived? He vaguely remembered seeing an arrow, but who had helped him? And where was his rescuer now? In answer to this last silent question a magnificent being stepped into the clearing.

It was a proud creature; his torso that of a man's but his body in the shape of a horse. He walked over to Harry wisely and stopped just before him. "Greetings Harry Potter."

Harry gasped. "H-h-how," he stuttered feebly.

"We centaurs know much more than what is told," the centaur replied serenely. "I am Jacques of the southern forest." When Harry remained silent, he added, "It was I who rescued you from the wolf." He just stared at the centaur in awe. Jacques bristled impatiently. "It was also I who replaced your arm; it was past mending. I have risked my place in my herd by helping a human. It is now time for you to do the same."

Harry stared horror stricken. How could he repay Jacques? He had nothing to offer. He told Jacques as much.

"In time you will return to the wizarding world, will you not? At such a time I ask for you to provide me with any information I ask. Agreed?" Harry nodded. "Good. To help you on your way, I tell you this; you need to go to Diagon Alley. Farewell Harry Potter. I will see you in time." And the centaur left the clearing, leaving Harry alone to wonder.

Harry had sat in the clearing for approximately five more minutes before he realised he was ravenous. The only problem was, what was there that he could eat? He did not dare to try and hunt some animal; even if he did he could not cook it. To create a fire here in a forest full of flammable trees could potentially be suicide. Harry could not eat plants though either. How was he to know which plants were poisonous and which weren't? Magical plants could kill him, he supposed. The only thing he knew for certain that he could find which wasn't poisonous would be the grass. That and possibly the tree leaves.

There was nothing else for it. There was no way Harry was going to live on grass and leaves. He would just have to find something that looked relatively safe to eat and then just try it. There wouldn't really be anything *too* dangerous would there? One would have thought that a wolf was as bad as it got. Harry knocked on a tree for good luck and walked off in search of something edible. After a short while of examining various looking plants, Harry finally decided to try and eat the fruit of, what looked to be, a strawberry plant. They were slightly pinker in colour than the strawberries he had eaten before but he decided that it might be due to magical surroundings. He hesitantly popped one in his mouth and screwed up his eyes, wary of side effects. He felt no different so gingerly opened his eyes and glanced at the skin of his arms. Normal. Assuming his face looked okay (there were no reflective surfaces in which to check) Harry ate more of the pink strawberries hungrily.

There seemed to be an unending supply of strawberries and by the time he was full of them, there was no dent in their numbers. He would have liked to take some with him but he had nothing to carry them with and he would need to keep his hands free. So he made his way through the dense undergrowth of the forest, carefully stepping over roots, ducking branches and trying his best to keep to one direction. Every now and then he cut a large cross into one of the tree trunks with the knife he had forgotten about the night before. Now, however, he kept it always at an easily accessible place.

Harry found himself thinking often about the strange voice he had been hearing lately.

Where it came from, he had no idea. Who it was, he also had no idea. What it wanted, the same. What did he really know about it? How did he know he could trust it? All he really knew was that it had encouraged him to run from the castle. Even so, how could Harry tell if it was lying? Normally he would be able to help judge from facial expression and tone of voice but that voice, constantly a whisper and forever disembodied. Maybe it was trying to trick him. Maybe it wanted Harry to get lost in this forest. Or maybe it just wanted to help him escape but then, wouldn't it want something in return? The centaur had. Now that he thought about it, everyone wanted something for themselves. No one just helped for the sake of helping.

The voice came from nowhere. It wouldn't tell him what to call him. It hadn't told him anything. Under normal circumstances these things would be highly suspicious but Harry yearned for someone to help him. He knew he was far too trusting. Then and there, under a large pine tree he happened to be walking past, Harry made a vow. He wouldn't trust *anyone* without good reason.

A spring came into Harry's sight and upon reaching it he knelt down, drank some of the water, splashed some of the coolant over his exhausted face and glanced down at his reflection. Upon doing so however, he had to do a double take. He no longer looked like the buoyant, joyful, healthy child he was before. Now he was slightly taller, his face had paled, his body thinner and his hair had grown past his ears. Harry looked at it in disgust. He reached his knife up to it and cut it roughly until it was shorter again. His attempts were not the best however, and his hair came out many different lengths and he ended up with a shallow cut on his face. He got up and moved on.

It was hard to tell how long he walked for with only the sun as guidance. He assumed it was several hours though as his feet ached, his back sore and he felt himself growing hungry again. He sincerely hoped he was going in the right direction. Soon some non-toxic looking berries were found and Harry cautiously nibbled on the corner of one. Not keeling over dead, he decided that they were safe to eat and ate until he was satisfied again. Harry stumbled on for perhaps

an hour more before the sun began to set in the glowing sky. He was beginning to get tired now, but he dared not settle down to sleep. Who knew what strange creatures would find him? He carried on relentlessly. After night had truly come upon him and the moon was high overhead, Harry could walk no further. Should he attempt to do so he felt that he would collapse in exhaustion. The night was cold now too. He yawned and shivered simultaneously. There was nothing for it. He would have to sleep. The ground, he decided, was not altogether safe so he spied a nearby tree which did not look too hard to climb. After heaving himself up with much difficulty, Harry positioned himself so that he was not likely to fall and was asleep in seconds.

Harry awoke with a yell as a loud noise sounded in his ear. He fell out of the tree in fright and fell the few metres to the ground, landing hard on his side and hitting his head painfully off a large root. He swore as everything shook before his eyes and he screwed up his face in pain. Gingerly he sat up and touched his head lightly where he hit it, wincing as he did so. It was not just his head which felt the pain however; the whole of his right side (which he had landed on) ached as he moved and he felt for sure that he would have bruises all over it the next day. He sighed knowing that the rest of the day was unlikely to be much better than the start, collected himself and set off.

The route he had been heading along yesterday was south east according to the position of the sun at that moment (it had barely risen over the horizon). He decided that it would be best to head in a definite direction and so headed south.

As he walked he scanned the trees and vegetation for something edible to eat. He finally settled on some ripe looking blackberries. He took a handful and continued on his way, eating them as he went. The day wore on and the heat of the sun bore down upon Harry even though only snippets of it could be seen between overhead branches. After a while he began to feel a bit, off. Passing a bush full of the same type of berries he had eaten earlier that day Harry could keep them down no longer. He doubled over and wretched them back up. Shaking he walked on and ate no more that day. Surprisingly he met no more creatures of the night. In fact, he met no wildlife save the

occasional bird twittering happily high about him. It was shortly after midday that he heard it.

“You need to go faster. If you keep going like this we’ll be in here for weeks.” That strange voice was back, whispering each word carefully.

Harry said nothing for a moment, then, “We?” he asked sneeringly. “I see no “we”. There is me and me alone.”

“Don’t you want me here?” the voice whispered hypnotically.

Scanning his surroundings for any source of the voice, Harry thought carefully about his answer. What was the voice to him? When he had asked for help it had not come; at least not from the voice. At his time of need the voice had abandoned him. What help was “Sir” anyway? All he had done was tell Harry to run which he was going to do anyway. Then he had led him into this forest full of dangers and poisons. With no help whatsoever afterwards as well. “No,” Harry said softly. And he began to run, as far away as he could from the haunting voice.

“I can help you,” Sir whispered still. He ran faster which he had not even thought possible. “You can’t run from me. I will always be here.”

“Leave me alone!” Harry cried, running further. “I was fine before when I was alone; I’ll be fine again!”

“But Harry, you were never alone...”

“Go – away!”

“... I have always been here...”

“Why – are – you – doing – this?” Harry’s breath was running out now whereas the voice remained fine.

“...helping you.”

“You – haven’t – helped – me!”

“I have been driving away the creatures for you.”

“Great – job,” Harry said sarcastically and he waved his wooden arm, accidentally hitting it off a tree trunk but he felt no pain.

“That can be a great asset to you.”

“I – don’t – care!” His breathing was coming out in wheezes now and he could run no further save he collapse. He fell to his knees his hands the only things stopping him from lying on the ground.

“You have travelled more today than you would have had you been going at your normal pace.”

“Go away,” Harry moaned before the world fell to oblivion.

In the days that followed Harry mostly ignored the voice whenever it tried to speak to him. He learnt slowly what berries were definitely not good to eat – being that they either were poisonous or tasted horrible or both. Wearily he walked on and on and on and on and on. The forest seemed never ending. He was sure he was still walking in the same direction; he checked it against the sun each morning. He was getting little sleep and, had he seen his reflection in a mirror, Harry would have seen that there were dark circles underneath his eyes. True to the voices claim, he saw no creatures of any kind apart from the birds, which seemed to be following him to drive him insane with their cheery chattering.

Despite what Harry had said about not needing the voices advice, he took it anyway and picked up his pace somewhat although he didn’t let “Sir” know this. Everyday Harry woke up feeling exhausted, sore and unprepared for the day ahead of him. This could be from lack of sleep, food or rest though, or it could possibly be a combination of the three. Either way, Harry wasn’t too concerned. Slowly but surely the trees eventually began to thin after endless days of travelling. Just when he was about to give up hope of the forest ever ending, the trees suddenly disappeared in front of Harry and before him stretched open plains as far as he could see. There were no trees, no bushes, no anything. There were just long grassy fields which stretched to the horizon and back again. He heaved a heavy sigh and began trekking across them.

It was hard to believe no one had built anything of any description on them yet. One would have thought that someone would claim the fields their own and started building houses or such but there were no buildings or roads, just grass. Hacking his way through the grass took slightly longer than the undergrowth of the forest. The grass was very dense and snagged at his legs. It was quite good for sleeping in, Harry soon discovered. It protected him from the hard earth and provided great cover for animals (though he had yet to see any after the wolf).

It was a warm night that Harry woke up suddenly. At first he didn't know why but then he felt something slither over his neck and slide underneath it. His eyes widened in fright and he sat up suddenly, disturbing the creature. It quickly tightened its hold on Harry's neck making it slightly difficult to breath. He struggled with the animal and as he tried to pull it off, he felt its smooth scales, its cold exterior and felt its circular body. He had no doubt that it was a snake. It continued to tighten its coils and Harry found he could no longer get any air into his lungs at all. Panicking now, he tugged viciously but to no avail. His body screamed for oxygen. He felt, rather than saw, his face turning a shade of puce.

"Stop," he managed out feebly with the only breath he had left. Surprisingly the snake loosened itself but did not dislodge completely. This was enough for Harry though. He gasped and spluttered trying to swallow the much-needed air. After he was sure he would not faint from lack of air, Harry gently tried to pull the snake free. It started to tighten itself as it felt him doing this however so he quickly desisted. "Off. Let go," he said. He gasped. That wasn't his voice! It wasn't even English! Instead of the intended words, Harry had spoken in hisses much like a snake would.

"Okay then human," he was even more surprised to hear the snake say. "You only had to ask."

"You – you speak?" he spluttered in wonderment.

"I believe it is you who speaks, human," the snake hissed and it slithered away into the darkness once more.

Harry stared around perplexed. Who knew he could speak to snakes? He supposed it must be a thing that wizards could do, like their wandless magic. Still, it scared him slightly. He didn't hate snakes, per se, but there were definitely animals he preferred. Of all the things to be able to speak to!

Harry traversed the plains for many more days after this. The voice pretty much left him alone, as when he did speak, he got no response. The days wore on and soon they started to get colder slightly. It must have been approaching the end of the summer. He was also shocked to realise that this new development meant that sometime while he had been in the forest, it had been his tenth birthday.

One day Harry was walking tiredly onwards still when he could have sworn that the horizon was getting a faint black line to it. As he moved closer he saw that it was indeed, becoming darker. Closer still, Harry saw with joy filling his heart that it was buildings, the outskirts of a town. He walked more purposefully, his hope renewed. At last! The end was in sight!

It took Harry two more days to get to the town. He had to go slower, he realised, if he walked, people looking out from the town might see him and that would look more than a tad strange. So he had to crawl the last two days. It was hard work crawling; it was difficult to push away the long grass and it hurt his back greatly. Nevertheless he arrived on the outskirts at the end of his second day.

The houses didn't slowly build up until there were great blocks of them. Instead they suddenly began the city, as Harry realised it now must be. It would look suspicious if he just wandered out of the wilderness into it so he decided to walk around the city until he found a road going in. It took him the rest of the day to find such a road. Did the walking never end? He glanced up at a large sign that said:

Welcome To London

Harry let out a frustrated yell and then uttered several swear words between every few words he spoke. "What the hell! I've been walking for ages and I'm back where I started from! That of a man can go to hades!" And so on and so forth. Still cursing, he wearily entered the city in search of somewhere to stay. First of all, he decided, he would have to find Mir. Harry *had* to know if he was okay.

He wandered the streets until he found a place well hidden from view in the back of an alley. He settled down and slept till dawn when he would start to familiarise himself with the streets of London again.

The next morning he did just that. First he decided on a plan of action. Mir would most likely have gone to the place that he and Harry had first met in case he had returned there. He decided to start looking there. It took Harry a long time to find the place where Sting had taken him those many years ago. It had been such a long time since he was there. It was around midday when he finally arrived outside the back wall of the abandoned building.

Harry stepped forwards nervously. What was it Sting had done? Knock the wall. After doing this there was no response. Hadn't someone knocked back when it had been Sting? Maybe there was a

specific way you were supposed to do it. Try as he might however, Harry could not remember how it had been done. He tried knocking again. Nothing. Dejectedly he stepped away from the wall. He was about to turn around when a shout made him stop in his tracks.

“Hey, kid! Get away from there!”

Harry swore. Did the torment *never* end? He turned to face the shouter and gasped. Standing there was a face he definitely knew. It was a teenage boy who looked no older than sixteen. The boy looked filthy and was wearing old, worn clothes with frayed ends and several tears. Harry’s face split into a weary smile.

“Sting!” he cried happily. At least he tried to. His voice came out hoarse and worn from not using it in so long. He coughed and tried again. “You don’t know how good it is to see you.”

Sting’s face twisted into an expression of terror. “Who are you?” he said shakily, taking a step back. “How do you know my name?”

“Sting? Don’t you recognise me?” Harry laughed nervously. What was going on? Surely Sting wouldn’t have forgotten him? “It’s me, Harry.” There was no reaction from him other than a small shake of the head. “Harry Potter? Don’t you remember me?”

Sting continued to back away slightly. “N-n-no...” he whispered. “H-H-Harry’s dead. Y-you don’t even look like him. He’s gone.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “I’m *what* now? Sting what’s happened? Why don’t you believe me? I even have my scar look.” He pushed away his matted hair hiding his lightening bolt scar. “See? It is me.”

“No!” Sting yelled, angry now. “How c’n you even pretend to be him? You’ll never live up to his name! Harry Potter died two months ago!” and then quietly and unhappily, to himself, he whispered, “And I did nothing.”

Harry frowned. Why on earth would Sting think he was dead? “What happened?” he asked urgently. He had to find out. “Sting can you at least tell me what happened? Or if you like you can ask me anything only Harry would know. I am him, Sting.”

An odd expression came upon his face. It was a look of deep sadness that did not suit Sting's ruffian look at all. "Two months ago a boy called Mir came to me," he said so quietly that Harry had to bend closer to listen. He did not object to Sting introducing Mir as if Harry was not himself. At least he had started talking sense. "He told me that Harry Potter had disappeared with a wizard when Harry was trying to defend him. Mir begged me to help look but I couldn't. I had a life then. I had found a home. I couldn't just give my one chance of happiness up. I'd only even known Harry Potter for a couple of days. Besides what help could I be? I don't know much that would be of use.

"Mir left and life went on. But then, about a month after Mir came to me, the Muggles were told to be on the lookout for him because he was missing. So what, I said. It was nothing to do with me. But I couldn't shake this nagging feeling. Why wasn't I doing more to help? Mir was at least trying to find Harry but I, I was doing nothing. I was too selfish to help. And then they found it. It was all over the news. Harry Potter's blood had been found in a wood and prints had been found. Wolf prints. A wolf had killed Harry Potter. If only I had helped! And then *you* come along and mock the dead! I'll kill you!"

Sting shouted the last part angrily at Harry. "But Sting," Harry said confused. "I am Harry."

"Liar!" Sting fell to his hands and knees. He looked exhausted. Great lines appeared under his eyes. Something hit Harry. Sting wasn't talking with the same gangster accent he had had before. He asked about this. "I was sent to a boarding school," he said with resentment. "I was beaten when I didn't speak properly. If I had looked for Harry Potter I might not have been."

"How do you get into the building?" Harry demanded decisively. Maybe someone in there would make sense of this bizarre situation.

"Can't!" Sting cried woefully. "They're all gone! Dead!"

Harry's eyes widened in alarm. His last possible lead to finding Mir went out the window. He couldn't understand how everyone seemed to have disappeared. No wonder Sting was acting so despondently. Perhaps he blamed himself for it all.

“What....” He had to swallow his alarm. “What happened?”

Sting looked at the ground hatefully as if it were the cause of all the problems. “A fire burned that night. The night Harry Potter was found dead. It was my fault. I could have stopped it, but I didn’t. I was too busy *wallowing in self pity!*”

“Look Sting,” Harry said desperately. “It wasn’t your fault. Nothing was your fault. Harry Potter’s not even dead! I’m right here Sting! Right here!”

Sting raised his eyes slowly from the ground to gaze loathingly into Harry’s. “Not. My. Fault!” He yelled furious. “Yes it was! I could have stopped it all! And you, *you!* You still mock the dead. How dare you? How *dare* you!” He gave one last almighty yell of fury and lunged himself at Harry. It was fortunate that Sting was weak with depression because Harry too was weak. Weeks of walking had not left him in the best state to fight such a strong teen who happened to be a lot bigger than him.

Harry barely even had the energy to push Sting off him but he managed. As soon as he was free of the teen, he ran for it. His exhausted body and mind struggled to keep running but he knew he had to. Sting was, well, not completely of sound mind. It was impossible to say what Sting would do. Harry kept running until he was sure he was not still being followed.

He slid down the wall of a dark alley. What would he do now? He had been counting on some sort of lead back at the abandoned house but that had failed miserably. It was rather hard to comprehend that *everyone* had either died, disappeared or been driven to insane chattering. When he thought about it, it all connected to him, the fire, Sting’s depression, and Mir’s absence. Never again, Harry decided. Never again would he let anyone be put in danger because of him.

Where else could he try? He supposed he could try Nymph and the rest of the gang’s place but truth be told, he was rather scared of what he might find had happened to them. If one more person’s life had gone down the drain because of him – well let’s just say that Harry would spill some blood. He sighed. Raising himself from the

ground with a lot of effort he began the long journey across London to find them.

By the end of the day he still had not made it to their last home he knew of. He had tried several others on his way but, as he suspected, they did not use them anymore. Harry knew for a fact, that the last one was their most recent and they should (fingers crossed) be still using it. What surprised Harry more though, was the fact that he had seen no kids on the streets when he had been travelling. Where had they all gone? It was as if they had all simply disappeared.

He decided to call it a long day and found a place in which to rest his drained body and give it some much needed rest.

The next day Harry set off again to find Nymph and the gang. He stretched his tired muscles. They were in dire need of a rest. His whole body was, in fact. Everyday he woke up and he was sore all over. He had gone too long without a good rest. It was starting to have side effects.

Harry walked along the main roads of London; he no longer cared about being seen by the police or being given suspicious glances. The main roads were the quickest way to get around so they would be the roads he used. It took Harry barely an hour to reach the last home.

Looking at the well-used hidden entrance he smiled thankfully. There was graffiti all over it and one particular logo stood out. "Nymph Rules, Summer 1990," it said. That must mean, Harry thought, his spirits high. That the gang must have used it at least that summer which, if his sense of time was right, was just coming to a close. He walked right into the hiding place.

Knives were drawn and pointed savagely in his direction as he walked through the small gap between two walls. He walked on into the main of the room and smiled with a sigh. "Thank God," he breathed. At last! Some luck!

He picked Nymph out easily from the crowd. She frowned untrusting. She stared long and hard at Harry and soon everyone in the room

was looking between the two, seeing who would move first. It was clear that Nymph didn't recognise Harry either.

He rolled his eyes in exasperation. "Gods it's *me*, Harry. You people forget so easy." Everyone in the room gasped, the announcement sparking life into them. It seemed to hit them all suddenly that what he said was true. It was as if they just couldn't place his face to his name. Had he really changed that much?

"Oy! Pipe down!" Nymph took a step towards Harry. She looked stunned and dubious. What was going on *now*? " 'sit really you Harry?"

He leaned against the wall. Even though the day had barely begun he already felt shattered. "Nah. It's the Grim Reaper. Course it's me, you dolt."

Nymph narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "Prove it," she said simply.

How on earth could he prove it? "I've got me scar (he raised his fringe to demonstrate this point) and if that's not proof for you, how would you like me to prove it?"

She cracked her knuckles, deep in thought. "What," she asked in her best interrogator voice. "Was the first thing you said when you firs' saw me?"

Laughingly he replied, "You look like you descended from monkeys."

Gasping, Nymph ran over to Harry and flung her arms around his neck. "Ooooh! Harry you don' know how good it is to see you! I fot choo was dead!"

"Dead? Now why would you think that? I'm unkillable!" Although he said this as a joke, when Harry thought about it he realised it was kind of true. If only Voldemort could kill him, then no one else could and he wouldn't be able to die.

She released him and took a step back to examine him. Then, quite out of the blue, she slapped him hard across the face. Several people

snickered. "Don' choo *ever* do that again!" And then she muttered, "Disappearin', no word from you, and the like."

Harry rubbed his now red cheek. "What happened after I left?"

And the story came out – a lot more coherently than Sting's version. After Snape had captured him, Mir had been taken to hospital by a couple of kids. At first they had tried to help him themselves but Mir had refused to wake so, fearing the worst, they did the only thing they could think of. Surprisingly no questions had been asked: where did he come from, how did this happen and the like. When Mir had been released the first thing he had done was enquire about Harry. After finding out that Harry was missing, he had gone on a rampage searching everywhere in London for him but, obviously, he had been unsuccessful.

Mir had then disappeared from the gang's knowledge. Rumours were spread that the same people that had taken Harry took him. Others claimed that the police had caught him. The most popular belief however, was that he had been hit by a car. Not long after Mir had disappeared the story of a young boy getting hit by a car, that fitted his description, had been all over the news.

Not long after that, headlines started asking questions about Harry. It was said he was missing on the television news (they found out by looking in shop windows) and people were asked to come forward with any information in the papers. No one had any clue about his whereabouts and common citizens believed he was abducted. The news of him died down until about a month later when blood was found in a forest. The blood was forensically proved to belong to Harry and muddy wolf tracks had been found. The world had mourned the death of Harry Potter.

Well, Harry thought, this seemed to coincide with Sting's story more or less. The Muggle world had been told he died? Why had they been told he was missing in the first place? He was nothing to do with them, well, not really. Dumbledore and his goons might have alerted the Muggles just in case they had heard of him. Yes, that was probably it.

Mir. Oh Mir! Harry had failed him so much! He had promised he would help get him to Hogwarts and now look! Missing. That's where

it had gotten him. And potentially dead. Harry couldn't believe how badly he had failed him. He had gotten him into so much trouble, just for being with him.

"So?" prompted Nymph, bringing Harry out of his reverie.

He blinked at her. "So what?"

"So where have you been all this time?" She was rather rude when she talked to him.

Harry gave her a long stare. Should he tell her? It might put her in danger. Besides that he wouldn't be able to tell her the whole truth even if he did tell her. After all, she didn't know about wizards did she? It was rather hard to keep track of who did and who didn't these days.

"Tell her." The creepy voice was back and whispering all the more.

"Did I ask for your opinion?" Harry asked loudly.

Silence met this, then, "No but I shall give it to you anyway. She knows of the wizarding community. Tell her."

Harry snarled. "Go away! I don't want you here!"

Everyone was staring at Harry now, most in confusion. Nymph took a step back.

"Harry? Who you talkin' to?"

"Don't you hear it?"

"... no."

Every curse under the sun came out of Harry's mouth then, all directed towards Sir. He ran a distracted hand through his hair, showing his wooden arm in the dim light. He hid it quickly behind his back. Harry looked fearfully at Nymph.

She looked him up and down, worriedly. "Harry, what happened? What's happened to you?"

Harry's breath constricted in his chest. He was hearing voices no one else could hear now. He felt sure that was a sign of madness. There hadn't been enough time for everything to set in Harry's mind yet. There was no way he was ready to explain it all to someone else. Sure, it had been two months but those had been focused on getting out of the wilderness.

Nymph took a consoling step towards him. Gently she asked, "Harry, was it the wizards who did this to you?"

He glanced around the others faces worriedly. There had to be a reason that wizards didn't tell Muggles about themselves and here was one girl about to blow it for them. What was he saying? Muggles had every right to know about wizards. Perhaps it was being around them too much that was starting to make him think like them. No, he would *never* be like them. The other kids didn't look confused in the slightest though. Maybe they just thought that it was another nickname for a gang.

Nymph took hold of his bony arm gently. "Come on. We've got some talking to do." She began to lead him out of the den and only paused when someone called after them,

"Get him some new clothes while you're out there! And a decent meal too!"

She ignored the voice. Harry wasn't even listening. He let her lead him away from the crowd. How could he tell her everything that had happened? Could he even tell her? Should he? No matter what the answers to the questions were, Harry knew one thing for sure.

It was truth time.

As Harry and Nymph walked the streets of London, life was just beginning to waken. Curtains were being drawn, shops were being opened and breakfast was being eaten. A few cars slowly began to drive past the quiet street as workers headed off. They walked until they came to a small swing park. They sat down and looked about them. It was deserted.

Nymph turned to Harry and he deliberately avoided her eyes. "So?" she asked pointedly.

Still not looking at her he replied innocently, trying to postpone the inevitable, "So what?"

"Don't play dumb with me. So where've you been?"

"Around." Still evasive although Harry wasn't really sure Nymph would just let it go. Just as he had predicted, she didn't.

"Look Harry, I can understand if you didn't want to say anything around the others but there's no reason to keep quiet now. I know about wizards. What happened?" It was quite surprising that she knew about the magical community. In fact, a surprisingly large amount of people he had met just happened to know that magic existed. The exact why and how was beyond him though.

Harry didn't move and he continued to stare hard at the ground in front of his swing. "Nothing." If he told her she could potentially be in danger. It was too much to risk her getting caught because of him. He shouldn't even be talking to her now. Everyone connected with him always ended up in trouble. Sting, Aunt Petunia, Mir. His heart constricted.

Nymph got to her feet angrily. She reached out and forced his head upwards so that he had no choice but to look at her. "Don't you "nothing" me, Potter. Something obviously went on when you disappeared. You come back after two months – two flipping months! – and you're talkin' to yourself, you've got a wooden arm and you look like death! Harry, you know you can trust me. What happened?"

There was silence for a moment. Slowly Harry said, "Can I?"

She raised her eyebrows. "Can you what?"

"Can I trust you?"

Nymph let his head drop suddenly, furious. "Can you trust me? *Can you trust me?* Of course you can! Harry what went on? You've changed so much. Before you left you never doubted anyone. You kept no secrets. But now, now, you have to ask if you can trust me? You should know you can but you don't. Harry we street kids help each other; we *trust* each other. No questions asked. What you doubtin' us for now?"

He couldn't tell her. No. How could she understand that it was his fault Mir was dead; that he had condemned a whole house full of children to orphanages; that it was him who had driven Sting to depression; it was him that put them all constantly in danger? He was putting them all constantly in danger... why? Was he so selfish that he would rather *everyone* he knew be in danger just so he would be happy? Would he even be happy? He had found out what had happened since he left but what now? He could go back to his life before. No, that was wrong. His life would never be the same as it was before. Nymph was right he *had* changed.

Harry needed a plan of action. There was no way he could just carry on, pretending nothing had happened. The centaur had told him to go to a place called "Diagon Alley". Why he had to go there, Harry had no clue but the centaur had helped him and needed him alive to be able to pass information on later so it wasn't likely to be a trap. No obvious danger at least. There would be danger wherever Harry went. Heck, it could be dangerous sitting in that park. Well, if the centaur said he needed to go to Diagon Alley then that's where he'd go.

Suddenly he realised that Nymph was still watching him and that he had been silent for several minutes now. Harry supposed that he was too used to being alone now. After all, he had spent two months - though it still seemed incredible to him - without another sane person to talk to (somehow Sir didn't really seem to fit in that category). Maybe that's the way it should be, he thought. Him, Harry, alone where no one would be in any sort of danger because of him.

"I'm afraid," he said formally. "That I can't see you anymore. Or the others for that matter."

Nymph blinked in surprise. "You what? Look, I understand you've bin through a lot now, but you don' need to do everything alone."

Why didn't she take the hint? Well if she was going to continually try and be his friend he'd just need to make her not want to be his friend. What? He was beginning to confuse himself now. This was going too far. He was definitely trying to overcomplicate things now.

"You don't know where Diagon Alley is do you?"

"What?" Nymph was definitely getting annoyed now. "What's that got to do with anything? Stop changing the subject!"

"Do you though?" Inside Harry was smiling triumphantly. Talk about killing two birds with one stone. He was annoying Nymph and he could find out where he was supposed to be going all at the same time. If he managed to annoy Nymph enough, perhaps she would decide he wasn't worth the trouble and never speak to him again. If only it were that easy.

A brief moment of silence passed as she contemplated her answer. "I think you go through a bar on a street somewhere in Charing Cross Road."

Harry stood up off the swing and started walking away from Nymph. Charing Cross Road was a large road with many shops, bars and restaurants so he had better start checking it as soon as he could if he hoped to find the right bar.

"Hey! Where you going?" Nymph called after him, her tone more than a little annoyed that he had walked away in the middle of a conversation.

"Away." Harry did not break his stride or even turn round in his reply.

"Away where?"

“Away from you.” And that was all Harry would say as he walked, ignoring her calls after him. Nymph did not follow, however, for which Harry was grateful. He did not know how he would be able to shake her off otherwise. He had a sneaking suspicion that he would meet her again and not too far into the future either. Pushing these thoughts away he focused on the task at hand.

Charing Cross Road. Well that narrowed his search down slightly but he would still have to find where about on the long road the pub was and if his instincts were correct, there would be some anti-Muggle charm on it. That would make thing slightly more difficult. No doubt the pub would be hard to find and not knowing exactly where it was, Harry had his work cut out for him. Charing Cross Road wasn't exactly small. There was also the fact that he was on the other side of London. To be fair it was pretty much in the middle of London but he couldn't really be any further away from it.

Harry bit his lip as he looked at himself in a shop window. He stuck out from the crowd like a daffodil in a field of poppies. His face was covered in dirt as were his arms and legs which you could see through the many tears and rips in his shabby clothes. If he ever saw a stereotypical looking homeless person he was sure it would look exactly like he did then. Passers by stared at him and he felt sure he was attracting unwanted attention. He would need to clean himself up and get some new clothes.

First, Harry picked out a fairly busy clothes shop. The security guard eyed him suspiciously as he wandered innocently round. He picked out some clothes that looked as if they would fit all right and worked his way back round to the front of the shop, careful to make sure that he still appeared to be browsing. Once at the closest rack to the door, he dashed out. Immediately alarms went off inside the shop and he could hear the security guard chasing after him though he didn't look back. Despite his small size and appearance Harry was a very fast runner. He would have been even faster had it not been for his aching feet which were the result of endless days of use. Nevertheless he outstripped the guard easily and after ten minutes of running, Harry lost him.

The next thing he had to do was find a place to have a shower. This was slightly more tricky however to do without getting caught. Luck had certainly decided that at last Harry deserved to be shined on and he had barely rounded the next corner when he saw a public swimming pool. It wasn't too hard to sneak in and use the showers; all Harry had to do was pretend he was with someone who was paying to get in. Not long after he entered Harry left looking much cleaner and blending in much better. The only thing he had forgotten to do was get some shoes. The ones he wore now had their soles peeling off the bottom and had many holes. It would be difficult to get shoes though. Not because he would get caught, but because his feet were swollen, cut and blistered. Harry hadn't actually noticed before and he supposed he was just too preoccupied. He had definitely done too much walking.

Just as he suspected, he could get no trainers that fit or did not rub against his feet painfully. He got the most comfortable ones he could find, though and had to admit that they were still better than the worn ones he had been wearing.

All that was left now was to get some food and find Diagon Alley. Food was no problem and he quickly took some from a nearby shop. Hunger quelled, he set off for Charing Cross Road. Now that he knew about the state his feet were in, it was a lot harder to keep walking. They had developed a dull ache. More than that, Harry was quite sick of walking so much. To solve this problem, he casually took a bike from outside a post office where a child no doubt would be upset at having his or her bike stolen.

The next day and a half was spent cycling over London. Upon reaching Charing Cross Road, Harry started to search systematically for the pub after leaving the bike leaning against a shop window. He searched every pub working his way up the street. It took him a good few days to go through them all. At the end of the very dull week (to be fair, Harry hadn't spent all the time searching pubs; he spent quite a bit of time stealing money and such) he still hadn't found Diagon Alley. In a very bad temper Harry decided to try a different means of search.

Looking out from his hidden corner in the Underground station, Harry searched faces for anyone who looked remotely like a wizard or witch. More than once he found himself speaking to a very confused Muggle. At last he found a wizard that Harry managed to identify by a strange vibe that came off the man.

"Excuse me, sir," Harry asked a shabby looking man in a polite voice. The man had a certain *air* about him that suggested he was a wizard. "But do you know the way to Diagon Alley? It's just, I'm supposed to meet my mum there and I seem to have gotten lost."

The man looked at him critically. Harry was proud to say that the clothes he was wearing were still in good condition. The man was shabbily dressed and had brown hair that was going grey in parts. His face was weary and he looked slightly ill. "What were you doing out alone?"

Fortunately he had prepared a good cover story. "I was at my Muggle friend's house and had to meet my mum in Diagon Alley when she was done her shopping."

"Alright then," the man said. "I'm going there anyway. What's your name?" he started to walk off and Harry hastened to follow.

Names screamed in his head but nearly all of them wouldn't sound like a wizard's name. Most of them were nicknames too. "What's *your* name?" he retorted instead. Hopefully he would just sound cautious at being asked questions by a stranger.

The man laughed a hollow laugh and said, "Remus Lupin and you are?"

Harry bit the inside of his cheek. All the names that had been screaming at him a minute ago seemed to have run away, scared at actually being used. His mind was completely blank. "James," he decided. They walked on in silence for a few minutes. "You look sad." Harry finally chose to voice after the silence had become more than a little awkward for him.

Remus Lupin looked at him sorrowfully. "That would be because I am."

“Why?” It would be best to look like an inquisitive child like he probably would have been had events not taken a turn for the worse in his short life. Besides that, it couldn’t hurt to learn about wizards.

“My friend’s son is missing.”

A brick fell into Harry’s stomach. It was just coincidence, right? It had to be. There must be loads of kids who go missing in the wizarding world. “I’m sure he’ll turn up.”

Remus looked at the ground. “I’m not so sure. He’s been missing a while now.” If possible the brick sank even lower. It had to be a coincidence. Children disappeared all the time in the normal world so it would be a good assumption to think they did so too in the wizarding world... right?

“What’s his name?” Harry asked, just to be certain.

“Harry Potter.”

Breath constricted in Harry’s chest, as he fought not to panic. Don’t do anything suspicious he chided himself. “Em,” he said nervously. “I though he was dead.” Inwardly congratulating himself on his quick thinking, Harry found his breathing become ever so slightly easier.

Remus looked at him sharply. “Who told you that?”

“I-it was on the Muggle news.” Again, he congratulated himself.

Remus visibly relaxed though he still looked sorrowful. “There have been rumours,” he confessed.

They arrived outside a small entrance to a pub, which Harry had somehow overlooked before. There had to be a spell on it or something, he thought. They entered and walked right out through a back door. There was a large brick wall that Remus tapped with a long wooden stick that must have been his wand. It melted away to reveal Diagon Alley and Harry fought back his gasp of surprise.

“You okay from here, James?” Remus asked.

Harry nodded mutely. He started to walk away from him. There was no need to spend any more time with him than necessary. It actually surprised Harry that Remus hadn't recognised him, seeing as he had known his father. This was getting a little eerie. Why did no one recognise him any more?

"And Harry?" Remus's voice called after him as if he had something more he wanted to say.

"Yeah?" he turned round and gasped in horror. Remus likewise gasped. Harry cursed natural reactions and ran for it. How could he be so stupid! To let himself be tricked so easily, it was clear he was out of practise at discretion.

Footsteps ran after him and all Harry could think was:

Here we go again.

Remus did not shout after Harry as he had expected. Instead he focused all of his energy into chasing him, a feat that Harry noticed. Perhaps it was so not to draw attention and lose him in the crowd or perhaps it was because he did not want to raise his hopes in case it was not actually Harry. Either way, it didn't matter much to him. All Harry cared about was ditching Remus.

He dodged between wizards and witches who were window-shopping or hurrying down the street, eager to get on with their daily business. It was slightly easier for Harry who was small and nimble enough to do so without trouble, but for Remus, who kept bumping into people and had to follow his path, it was not so easy. Harry rushed through the cobbled street ever searching for an escape route. He stumbled slightly but it was enough to send him sprawling over the ground. The only reason Harry fell, however, was a shrill cry that came from behind him which startled him. Looking up from his position on the ground, Harry saw something that made him gasp in surprise. Remus too had fallen but not out of fright; someone had rammed into him from the side.

Nymph was staring at Harry fiercely. He stared back. Why was she attempting to help him? He didn't need her help! He had been on his own for the past couple of months and nothing had happened then. Come to think of it people were always doubting that he could take care of himself; Mir had, Nymph did, Dumbledore did and who knew who else. No one seemed to understand that he was fine by himself. The last thing he wanted was help especially from Dumbledore. People wouldn't even think Harry needed help if it hadn't been for that old fool.

"Leave me alone!" Harry cried at Nymph. People around them turned to stare. It was a rather odd sight, Harry thought; a child on the ground, a man unmoving and a third person staring down at them both.

Remus stirred, moaning slightly, from his position on the ground. Nymph darted forwards and didn't slow as she bent down, grabbed

Harry by the collar, hoisting him to his feet and dragged him off with her. He somehow managed to find his footing and run along with her. Arguing could wait. The most important thing at that moment in time was to get as far away from suspecting wizards as possible. This being the case, Harry ignored the fact that Nymph was helping him and ran silently beside her.

Together they ran with all their might, glancing all the while for a good place to hide. They ran up the cobbled street and round a corner into more shop filled lanes. Was that all the wizarding world was? Shops? Harry guessed so as the turned another corner into more of them. Behind them wizards were getting curious; there was shouting and angry voices. Finally they hurried into a crowded shop and mingled with the crowd. Even if they were followed in, Harry and Nymph would be hard to spot.

Around them shelves were filled with different coloured products. Things that looked like water balloons, bizarre looking sweets, wet start fireworks and all manner of odd things. It certainly helped matters that this appeared to be some kind of a joke shop and the customers that milled around so pleasantly were mostly children. Harry and Nymph managed to stay there for approximately half an hour before they decided it was safe to return to the outside.

Still they did not speak as they walked down Diagon Alley once more. Passers by still turned to stare, however. This could be from their different clothing or their slightly scruffy appearance. Which, Harry couldn't tell. The commotion that had occurred when Remus Lupin had been chasing them had died down as well. All the same it was an unspoken agreement between the two that it was not quite as safe for them in Diagon Alley. They soon left for the muggle world once more.

It was when they were safely hidden from common eye in a back alley that Harry rounded on Nymph. "What do you think you're playing at?" he asked roughly.

"I was *tryin'* to help!" she exclaimed defensively.

Harry glared at her even though he knew well that this was true and her intentions had been good. "You'd have been more help if you'd stayed away."

She returned the look. "Oh yeah? Hows that then? What would you have done? I couldn' just let 'em take you away again, Harry. Look at what they did to you last time!" and she gestured at his wooden arm to prove her point.

Looking sadly down at it, he said, "It wasn't the wizards who done this."

"What?"

"You heard."

Nymph walked over to him concernedly. "Harry, you need tae tell someone what happened. Ah'm right here. Ah can help!"

"Help?" he roared suddenly furious with her. Why couldn't she have stayed away? It was almost as if she *wanted* to be in danger. "If you want to help, go away!"

"Why?" Nymph seemed rather angry too now. "What did ah do to deserve this? You left, without warning, ah might add, and then you come back and wan' nothing to do with us! Harry something went on when you were away an' I wan' tae know what."

"Well whoop-de-do for you then."

She shook her head. "Come on. Tell me."

"No." If she was going to be stubborn, then so would he.

"Why not?"

"Because!" he cried when it at last became clear to him that she wasn't going to be brushed aside so easily. "You're all ready gonna be in trouble now for helping me! If you'd stayed away like I wanted you to, the wizards wouldn't have cared about you but now they'll want you caught so they can find me!"

"Do I look like I care?"

Looking up at her Harry saw that she had a point. She obviously didn't care. Still though, he couldn't put her in that danger.

"Go home."

She blinked. "What home? Harry we live in a hovel on the streets. What home is that to go tae?"

"A safe one."

Nymph looked sceptical. "Hardly," she replied bleakly. Harry said nothing. "Look. No matter wha' you say ah'm staying with you. It'll make things a whole lot easier on the both of us if you tell me wha' happened though."

Harry stared at her as he'd never stared at her before. A sudden doubt had entered his mind. Why was she so eager to know what had happened? Maybe she had only helped him out with Remus to gain his trust. Yes, that could well be the reason. She could be on the Dumbledore's side and wanted to trick him into being her friend. Or she could be under his control by some spell or something. Or she might not even be the real Nymph. How could he tell? Pondering on this line of thought Harry realised that she had never mentioned anything about the wizarding world before. Why? She must have recognised his name.

"Who are you?"

She blinked. "There you go again! Changing the subject. Who do you fink I am, Snow White? Or maybe ah'm sleepin' beaty. What do you fink ah'm doing? How am I supposed to prove to you that ah'm telling the truth! Put yourself in my feet!"

"Put myself in your *feet*?" Well that proved it. Some magical impostor would never know about Nymph's habit of misquoting well used phrases. For some reason this seemed to take an enormous weight off his chest and put him in a much better mood. "Nymph the saying is put yourself in my shoes. Not feet. That's gross."

She smiled thinly but she seemed relieved. "My shoes have so many holes in 'em that it might as well be feet."

There seemed to be no end to their arguing. It was pointless really; they were just voicing doubts. Harry did remember his earlier vows, though, and would not allow himself to trust her without reason.

“Why didn’t you tell me you knew about the wizarding world before?” he asked.

She muttered something incoherently and had to repeat it when he asked for a second time. “Ah don’ like tae talk bout it.”

Exasperated, he said, “Just tell me.”

“Wait just one second,” she exclaimed, outraged. “This is a two way motorway. If you tell me where you’ve bin, I’ll tell you why.”

“Two way *street*. The phrase is two way *street*. Get it right!” There was nothing more annoying than hearing phrases quoted wrongly. “Besides, how do I know that you even have something to tell me? You could be tricking me into telling you what happened when I disappeared.”

“Well how do I know you’ll tell me what happened to you once I tell you?”

Silence struck the air for a moment and then Harry admitted, “Point taken. So what do we do? I sure aren’t telling first.”

“Well neither am I. Do we just leave it then?”

Harry couldn’t believe this. He was blatantly ignoring his vow to himself and was beginning to trust Nymph. Well, said a snide voice in his head, when you think about it, you trusted her before you made that vow so really you aren’t breaking it. He smiled inwardly. He had just found a loop hole in his own vow. Oh well, he didn’t really care that much. Besides, she might be a great help to him one day.

Running a distracted hand through his hair, he said, “Fine. Gods, I’m too old for this.”

Nymph glanced around as if someone were there that would explain this to her. “Harry, you’re like, ten.” He grinned crookedly.

“Ten’s much too old to have to go through these kind of choices.”

At that moment a silent mutual agreement of sorts was made. Neither asked again of the questions that plagued them about each other. It was also the beginning of their living together and from then on, Harry had no more arguments with Nymph – well that was a lie, he had a few petulant ones. They lay low for the rest of the day. And the next. And the next. And the day after that. Okay, so they couldn’t really be bothered doing anything that required much effort. After that however, they decided to once more venture into Diagon Alley.

The street was more crowded than it was before. It must have been a weekend, Harry decided. Wizards were decidedly odd. The men chose to wear robes like the women and they wore stupid pointed hats that got in the way when entering or leaving shops. Goblins ran the wizard bank; who would trust their money with such devious looking creatures? They had all sorts of animals as pets – snakes, rats, owls, and some that Harry had never seen nor heard of before.

Hoods were kept up at all times by Harry and Nymph. It surprised them both that no one was wary of this and no one questioned them. No one thought to ask why they were out alone either.

A problem presented itself within Harry’s mind. How would he get to Hogwarts and how would he get his supplies? Nymph could buy his supplies if necessary and they could exchange some of the stolen muggle money at the bank (they had seen this done) but how would they know what to get? Such answers could be found when the time came.

The days were growing shorter and colder and a thin layer of frost had begun to rest on the ground each morning. This caused difficulties for the duo. If they continued to sleep outside or in cold secretes, they could potentially freeze to death or get pneumonia or the like. They spent many days searching for a place to stay and fortunately Nymph found a man who could help them.

“Oi, Harry!” She called him over to her. Standing next to her was a young man in his early twenties. He had thin brown hair, a pale face and a tired expression. His clothes were shabby and his shoes old. Pale blue eyes stared out of the sockets on his face.

“This man can give us a place with heat for the winter.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “For what?” These people always wanted something in return.

“Money of course.” She rolled her eyes as if this were the most obvious thing in the world. “He don’t mind where it comes from neither.”

“Aye, but how much?”

“Seventy a week.”

“*Seventy?*” That was a bit... extravagant. That kind of money was rather hard to come by on the streets, especially if you had to steal it all. “You kidding me?”

Nymph sighed. “Unfortunately, no. He wanted five hundred at first. The place ain’t exactly legal but it’s cosy; I’ve seen it.”

They might not get another chance and that was probably the best they could do anyway. “It had better be really ‘cosy’.”

It turned out that the place was in fact, “cosy”. It was well heated and had a large moth eaten sofa. It was probably one of the most comfortable places Harry had ever stayed in after his aunt died. The wallpaper was shabby and peeling and the carpet had more holes than Swiss cheese but it was *warm*. That didn’t make it any easier to get the money for it though. Harry ended up spending all of his time that winter stealing money so they could afford it.

Spring came and left and Harry and Nymph were forced to leave the ‘cosy’ housing; it was simply too hard to gain that much money every week. Exhaustedly they moved out and traversed across London to throw off any people who happened to be looking for them. It was amazing that they had not been pestered by them so far. There was no telling what would happen once they were discovered.

Summer arrived in a blast of sun and children returned to the streets as the schools let out. Harry knew that he would have to find some way to get all the supplies needed for Hogwarts this summer for the

next it would be too late. He would be going to Hogwarts on September the first and nothing anyone could say or do would make him change his mind but as usual the absurd voice that had deemed his head worth occupying, confused him more by raising doubts.

“Why do you insist on going to Hogwarts? You are safe out here on your own. No one has harmed you or your friend whilst you have been hiding.”

It was fortunate that Nymph was out because that left Harry the freedom to respond without the looks of scepticism he always received when he appeared to mutter to himself. Baring his teeth in annoyance at the incessant voice he spat,

“Liar. I suppose people dying, being sent to orphanages and foster homes, suffering from depression and being put in constant danger is ‘nothing’? If I go to the magic school I’ll be on equal ground; I’ll know just as much as them and then I can take *revenge* for all that senile man has done to me. Keep your friends close but your enemies closer and all that junk.”

“And how do you plan on not being recognised on instant? It’s not as if you can just waltz in and they’ll accept you with open arms,” sneered the voice.

Was he utterly *thick*? The voice, although appearing wise, sometimes came off as far less intelligent than Harry. “Obviously I’ll go by a different name and alter my appearance.”

“And this name is going to get on the list for new students how exactly?”

“I’ll put it on.” Harry gritted his teeth in frustration. Why didn’t the voice just leave him alone? It had to be the most annoying thing in the whole world.

“Good luck doing that unnoticed.” Oh great, he’d learned sarcasm now.

There was more than that which bothered him now, however. Carefully Harry had spied on new students getting their supplies for

the school and it appeared that getting a wand yourself was mandatory. It wouldn't exactly be a picnic to get the books and stuff either but hardly anything was a 'picnic' these days. Magical shops would be better warded against thieves than muggle ones. There was also the fact that he didn't actually know which books he would need. Even thinking about problems presented new ones. How would he get all the stuff to Hogwarts anyway?

Surprisingly Nymph solved several of these problems as she returned back to their current living quarters one night laden with a heavy trunk. Harry gawked at her, the unspoken question showing clearly on his face.

"I exchanged some money that I've been savin' for ages at their bank an' I told the shopkeepers that I lost ma list. All you need now is a wand." She was surprisingly blunt.

He frowned. "Why'd you do it for me?"

"Because I'm your friend," she said still being very blunt. "And I wanted to help you."

Something suddenly occurred to Harry. "You do know you're *not* coming with me, right?"

"Why not?" she cried. Evidently she had been trying to butter him up so that she could go but it was clear she had expected him to refuse. "Why can't I go with you?"

"Because you'd be in danger!" Harry shouted rather loudly. Who cared about being calm and rational? "Because no one can know I know you! You're safer on your own."

"Or maybe it's because you don't trust me enough! That's it isn't it? After all we've been through together, after all I've done to help you, you still don't trust me! I can't believe you!"

He blanched slightly. It was partially true. Harry had never grown to fully trust her and he had a strange feeling that it was mutual. She had, however, proven herself to be fully trustworthy but he could just not bring himself to trust her. It would mean that she was in even

more danger. Harry still refused to let anyone be harmed because of him again.

“Look if you want to help, you’ll stay away. I’ll be back in the holidays and you can help me then.” He was too tired to argue properly. “Thanks though,” he said with such gratitude that Nymph blinked, forgetting all her rage. “For everything you’ve helped me with.”

“Oh Harry,” and to his great and utter surprise, Nymph flung her arms around his neck and hugged him tightly. When she released them there were tears glistening in her pale grey eyes. “Ah’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you too.”

It turned out that the schoolbooks, trunk and other necessities for Hogwarts were not the only things she had gotten him. Somehow Nymph had managed to get Harry a potion that would disguise him for exactly three hundred and seventy-two days, meaning that it would wear off sometime the following summer. The potion would alter all of his features making it almost impossible for Harry to be recognised. Uncertainly he drank it and he felt no different but Nymph’s squeal of delight told him that it had worked.

All that was left was to get his wand, as Nymph had said. Amazingly she had enough money for that too. This did not help quench Harry’s nerves though as he entered a dusty old shop, alone.

“H-hello?” he called out quietly when no one came at the ringing of the bell above the door. The shop was lined carefully with long slender boxes stacked high up to the ceiling. There was a musty smell that Harry did not like.

“Ah, hello!” an old voice said from behind him, making him jump. “I am Mr Ollivander.” The speaker was an old man whose wide, pale eyes shined like moons in the dark of the shop.

“Er, hi. I’m here to get a wand?”

“Muggleborn?” Ollivander asked softly as he began pulling boxes off of shelves.

Harry, having no idea what he meant by 'muggleborn', simply nodded.

"Which is your wand arm?" Again he was perplexed as to what this meant and just said his right arm as he was right handed. Thankfully, Harry had taken to wearing black gloves and long sleeves to hide his wooden arm. The wizard seemed satisfied and a tape measure began taking measurements from all sorts of ridiculous places as he continued to rifle through wands. At last the measuring stopped and the man placed a long wooden wand in his hand. "Give it a wave."

Feeling very stupid and self-conscious, Harry did so and a vase exploded. He looked up in alarm.

"Perhaps not then." The wand was snatched back and another was thrust upon him. The same thing happened again. And again. And again. And again. And it continued to happen until Harry felt sure that he must have tried every wand in the shop.

"I wonder... No of course not, stupid idea... but still..." Ollivander was muttering to himself. He gently took down a final wand and handed it carefully to Harry.

At once he felt sure it was the wand for him. A sudden warmth reached his fingers as he grasped the wand's end and he brought it down through the air and emitted silver sparks.

Ollivander stared long and hard at him until Harry was prompted to ask – rather rudely – "What?"

"I had expected that wand to go to another boy but alas, he is feared dead." Ice plunged into the pits of Harry's stomach. "You see, the brother of that wand gave Harry Potter his scar."

Later when he returned to Nymph he told all that had happened whilst in the wand shop. She seemed much less anxious than him though and this came as a reassurance. Still, it would not do to be seen with the very wand that Harry Potter was supposed to have. He need not have worried however, as the next day the wand had mysteriously changed its own appearance. Yet another problem rose up within Harry's mind though.

“Nymph? How do the students get to Hogwarts?”

Early on the morning of September first, Harry found himself sitting alone on the Hogwarts Express, the only person to have arrived. It was still two hours before the train was due to leave and he wouldn't have boarded so early but Harry refused to let Nymph be anywhere near wizards. They had said their sorrowful farewells and parted. It had taken them many hours of eavesdropping to learn how the students of Hogwarts travelled there and it had been somewhat tricky learning exactly where to go.

Eventually, when listening in to a red headed family's conversations, they had discovered that a train took the pupils from Kings Cross Station. It was slightly harder to find out that it left from Platform Nine and Three Quarters and harder still to work out how to get onto it. There wasn't exactly a sign pointing them in the right direction. After many more hours of experimenting they finally cracked the puzzle and Harry was free to meet the train.

As he sat alone in the train compartment, Harry found himself already missing Nymph greatly. They had had their share of arguments, oh yes, but that did not make it any easier to bid each other farewell.

"Your plan to put your own name onto the list for new students will never work."

Harry gritted his teeth. He just wanted to be left alone for a while but no, that irritating voice would never allow that. "You got a better idea?"

"As it just so happens, yes."

Blinking in surprise, he sneered, "Oh yeah? Kindly share."

"I will put your name on the list."

Well that was certainly a surprise. There was no doubt in Harry's mind that the voice was far more capable of doing such things than he was. Still, it surprised him that 'Sir' would do anything to help him especially something as big as this. It would probably require a great

deal of magic and that was something that he was not really accustomed with. It would help a lot if the voice could do it for him.

"Thanks," he heard himself mutter.

"What name will you be going by at Hogwarts?"

Yet another complication to the elaborate web of lies Harry was attempting to weave. With so many other things to think about he hadn't thought of a name to go by. What should he call himself? It shouldn't be something too obvious like James as it was clear that aroused suspicion quickly. Mir would have been able to come up with something brilliant. He didn't have time to stop that thought surfacing and Harry felt his heart give a throb of moaning. It still hurt to think about Mir.

A clever name was hard for him to think of; with not much schooling many things were difficult for him to do. It would be great to be able to think of a witty name or a mixture of words in some other language but Harry knew next to nothing where foreign languages were concerned. Minutes passed as he thought of and dismissed many names. Eventually he found one he liked well enough to use.

"Jeremy Hart."

The voice did not speak again so Harry assumed that Sir was away doing whatever it was he did. He stared at his reflection in the window of the train. His hair was no longer black and uneven but it was now reddish brown although it still retained its ability to stand up in all directions. The green eyes which had stared from his face remained, for which Harry was glad. He rather liked his eyes. The shape of his face had changed too and it no longer was pale and thin. No part of him was especially thin anymore when it came to that. The potion he had taken was extremely effective and, though he didn't like to admit it, Nymph had been extremely helpful in finding it.

Having nothing better to do with the time that was left before the train left, Harry pulled out a book from his trunk with his gloved hand. The wooden arm would almost definitely alarm some people if it were seen so it was carefully hidden beneath the sleeves of his school robes and behind a black glove. The book which he was reading was

the book for Transfiguration; "A Beginners' Guide To Transfiguration" by Emeric Switch. It was difficult reading; it had been years since he had last attempted to. Harry found he often didn't understand words and had to sound them out but as he had been one of the brighter students in his year, he managed fairly well.

Slowly the students started to arrive with their families to the station. Some of them arrived with loud cracks, others just appeared but most of them came in the way Harry did; through the barrier between platforms nine and ten. He put away his book so that he could watch the families bid their children goodbye as they boarded the train. A few of the witches and wizards milling around the station were familiar to him. There was the red headed family who had been talking about getting to Hogwarts (they were the ones Harry and Nymph had eaves dropped on), there was a pale blonde boy and his father who had knocked into them and ignored them afterwards and there were several others who he had seen buying their school equipment.

Eventually the train left and there was a mad scramble to get on. Families waved one last goodbye and it pulled out of the station. Harry returned to his book. It wasn't long however, when the opening of the compartment door and a freckled member of the red heads entered interrupted him, wearing a smudge of dirt on his nose.

"Can I sit there?" the boy asked sheepishly, pointing at a seat opposite Harry. "Everywhere else is full."

He wrinkled his nose. Whilst they had been listening to their conversation, Harry and Nymph had heard the family talking about how Dumbledore, the headmaster of the school, was "the greatest headmaster Hogwarts has ever seen". He didn't wish to have to share a compartment with someone who trusted so readily. "If you must."

Gratefully the boy sat and extended his hand to Harry. "I'm Ron Weasley."

He glanced up briefly from the book, which he had returned to. "Jeremy Hart," he said and then continued reading, ignoring any

attempts Ron made to have a conversation. Ron lowered his arm and turned to look out the window.

Unnoticed by Harry, countryside that was very familiar started to fly past the window. An old witch pushing a trolley full of sweets stopped by to ask if they wanted to buy anything but he declined. Having no money whatsoever it would be rather hard to buy anything. Ron Weasley also declined mumbling something about sandwiches.

Not long after that, the door opened yet again and a dark haired boy with a round, plump face entered. "Sorry," he said. "But have either of you seen a toad?"

Ron shook his head and Harry just bristled at being interrupted from his reading yet again. He had never had this much trouble at being undisturbed when he wanted to be left alone before!

"I've lost him!" the boy wailed.

"So go find him and leave us in peace," he replied testily.

The boy did so and they were left alone for a few minutes before, yet again, the door opened. It was a girl with busy brown hair this time and she had a slight bossy air about her.

"Have either of you seen a toad? Neville's lost one."

Ron shook his head again. "Yes of course I've seen a toad," Harry said sarcastically. "I'm secretly hiding him so that I can eat him later."

"No need to be rude. I was only trying to help Neville," she told him before turning to Ron. "You'd best be getting into your robes. I expect we'll be there soon." She made to leave but stopped at the last second. "You've got some dirt on your nose, by the way." And she left, leaving them to go back to what they were doing before.

As much as Harry wanted to continue reading there was little time for it anyway. A cool voice told the train that they would be arriving at the station in a few minutes and to leave their luggage on the train. It was dark outside now. He found himself thinking shrewdly, that it took a

lot less time going by train than on foot. True to the announcer's words, they pulled into another station.

"You handled that well," the voice said as Harry was jostled off the train. *"You don't want to be making friends who are friends with your enemy. The old one will pay one day for what he has done."*

"And I will be the one to make him pay," he muttered, barely audible in the noise of the crowd disembarking from the train, but he was sure Sir had heard.

A rough voice called the first years over and it turned out that it belonged to the massive gamekeeper that Harry had seen while watching out of the hospital window during his stay at Hogwarts. The man still had a large bushy beard and now that he was closer, Harry could see that he had small crinkling eyes. He motioned for them to follow and they did so. It grew very dark and it was similar to that of the forest. As they rounded a corner, the first years got their first sight of Hogwarts. There were gasps of delight as a large castle sat upon a high mountain shadowing a vast glossy lake.

The extraordinarily large man ushered them into little boats and he was horrified to find that he had to share one with the bossy, bushy haired girl, Ron Weasley and the round-faced boy whom Harry assumed was called Neville. The gamekeeper got a boat all to himself – which was just as well because there was no room for anyone else – and as he rowed forwards all the boats behind him moved as one.

Reaching the other side of the lake, the gamekeeper strode up to the large oak front door and knocked three times. A stern looking witch opened it cautiously and scanned their faces. She withdrew, looking slightly sad as if something she had been looking for was not there. As they stepped inside Harry felt immediately exposed. The entrance hall was huge and grand; it was bigger than any place he had ever been in. For this reason alone it made him feel like there could easily be someone lurking just out of sight waiting to pounce on them.

One of Harry's legs rubbed against the other and he felt the reassuring, short, thin blade of the knife, which was now kept almost permanently there. His other two knives, hidden up his sleeves,

weighed reassuringly. He found himself wishing that he hadn't left Nymph's going away present in his trunk. For another parting gift she had given him a small gun. Apparently it was so he could protect himself better but it was really the sentiment that made him treasure it. There was no telling how useful it would be against magic; for all he knew, it would have no effect on wizards whatsoever.

The stern witch started to speak to them all and it surprised Harry that he hadn't noticed the gamekeeper leaving. He listened intently to her first words, "My name is Professor McGonagall," before he stopped giving his full attention. Somehow he picked up on the fact that the first years would all be sorted into houses, which would be where they made friends from and stayed with. She left and as no one else made to follow her, neither did Harry.

Students nervously tried to make themselves presentable and he noticed Ron rubbing at his nose furiously. Murmuring rose up as the students chattered anxiously about how they would be sorted. Many strange theories rose, most of which were ridiculous. Someone gasped from behind Harry and he spun around, barely refraining from drawing a knife as he had become so accustomed to doing since he had returned to London.

Gliding through the opposite wall were a fleet of silvery ghosts. They were arguing amongst themselves and did not notice the first years at first. He wasn't surprised like most of the students around him; nothing seemed to surprise him very much any more. One or two of the ghosts introduced themselves but had to cut the pleasantries short when McGonagall came back through.

"The sorting ceremony is about to start."

She led them into another large hall which was packed full of students sitting at four long tables. There was one other table at the top of the hall, which they went and stood in front of. This table seated the teachers but Harry quickly averted his eyes which he thought was quite smart as the voice told him just after,

"The old man can read minds if you look him in the eyes. So can the potions master, to a lesser degree."

There didn't appear to be a ceiling, the vast hall simply opened out to the sky it appeared but the bushy haired girl was heard whispering that it was bewitched.

Every eye in the hall was upon them and Harry was not the only person to shift nervously under their gaze. A three-legged stool was brought into the hall and an old, worn hat was placed on it. The hat opened its brim like a mouth and sang a song about the four different houses. The whole song was rather pointless in Harry's opinion but the rest of the student body seemed to love it and it burst into applause when it finished. The song basically told him that Gryffindor was the house for the brave and courageous, Slytherin was the house for the ambitious and cunning, Ravenclaw was the house for the students who liked to learn and Hufflepuff was the house for the loyal and hard-working. Harry had absolutely no idea which house he would be in.

Professor McGonagall unrolled a long list of names and a knot tightened in his stomach. One by one the students were called up, in alphabetical order, to put on the hat which then would call out what house they would be in. Harry noticed that not everyone wore the hat for the same amount of time. Some sat for maybe a minute or more but others barely had the hat touch their heads when their house was called out.

"Finch-Fletchley, Justin."

It wouldn't be long now. It *couldn't* be long now. A few moments of anxiety passed as more names were called out.

"Granger, Hermione."

It was next. Harry's name would be called out next. His whole body tensed up as he awaited his new name, Hart, Jeremy.

But it never came.

More and more names were called out and more and more pupils were sorted but still Harry's name was not called. What would he do? If he didn't do something quickly he would be left standing alone after everyone else was sorted. Why hadn't his name been called out? He would investigate that later. Right then, he would need to come up with a new name and quickly. Jeremy Hart would have to be the start as he had told the Weasley boy that it was his name, so there would have to be a hyphenated surname or something. Something near the end of the alphabet... Once again Harry's mind went blank under such pressure. He looked up to the sparkling white stars for inspiration. White! Yes that would do but how would he get it on the list?

With all his might, Harry wished for his name to appear on the list. He hoped with all his will. *Please, I want on the list*, he thought desperately over and over, phrasing it differently each time. More names were called out and sorted. He pleaded with whatever forces there were desperately. He couldn't be found out, not now. Having come so far, having worked so hard, he needed to be on that list! Would it all be for nothing?

Out of the corner of his eye he saw something. It was so small and lasted for so little time at first he was not sure it had really been there. Harry's instincts overrode common sense, like they always did. Yes, the piece of parchment the names were written on so neatly had glowed ever so slightly but no one else had noticed. Everyone else was focused on the girl being sorted at that moment. He shook slightly with nerves now. Everything had suddenly become so much more dangerous.

"Malfoy, Draco!"

The hat had barely been placed upon his head when Slytherin was called out for all to hear.

"Potter, Harry!"

A giant hush fell over the hall. Students craned their necks to get a better look at the famous Harry Potter. No one went forwards. Murmuring and whispers filled the hall. Harry shifted nervously.

“Harry Potter?” McGonagall called again.

A rustling from behind the students left to be sorted prompted Harry to turn around, against his will. The teacher at the centre of the table was old and weary looking. He had placed his head in his hands briefly in mourning and then took it out again, looking much more solemn than he had been before. The old man gave a motion for McGonagall to call the next name and Harry looked quickly away lest Dumbledore should see him.

The sorting continued but the hall never returned to the patient silence as each student was sorted that it was before. There was a constant buzz as pupils wondered about Harry Potter. As the alphabet went on, he began to feel more and more nervous. If his name wasn't called out this time, there was little hope that it would be.

“White, Jeremy Hart!”

Harry breathed a sigh of relief but there was another rustling sound from behind him. He ignored it and walked shakily towards the three-legged stool, the knot of anticipation lessening considerably.

“*You did well back there,*” the voice hissed when Harry was half way to the hat.

“I'll deal with you later,” he hissed out of the corner of his mouth, greatly aware of all the eyes watching him. He sat down upon the stool and before the large hat drooped over his eyes, he saw the entire population of Hogwarts looking at him with mild interest.

A small voice – which Harry assumed was the sorting hat – whispered softly in his ear. “Ah, hello there Mr Potter, or should I say White?”

He nearly jumped off of the stool in alarm. He knew! The sorting hat knew! Panic filled his body once more and Harry prepared himself to bolt.

“Not to worry, though. I shall hold my brim and not mention this to a certain headmaster that you appear not to like.” He sighed in relief and relaxed ever so slightly. “What’s this?” The hat sounded surprised. “It seems you are not the only one who is listening.”

“Get to the point. Hurry up and sort him.”

“Yes, yes. I was getting there. It does take time for a hat as old as me to deal with such strange pupils, you know. Now where to put you?”

Harry practically snarled at the hat. “I don’t care just hurry up and put me somewhere.” He must have been quite a while under the hat already; people might get suspicious.

“You are brave, goodness yes, and courageous too. You will always go to the rescue of you’re friends; you are so very loyal to them. One could not claim you are not prepared to work hard though. You have already been working very hard so that you would not be found. Alas! You are cunning too, with a thirst to prove yourself and take revenge. Oh dear you are anxious to learn as much magic as you can. It would appear, Mr Potter, that you would fit in when sorted to any of the houses.”

“You’re great at your job, by the way,” Harry growled derisively.

“Patience, patience. You have few friends to be loyal to, I see, and you work hard because you know you must in order to survive this cruel world. Learning is the same for you but I do detect a slight enjoyment from it. Were you any normal pupil I would choose between Gryffindor and Slytherin.”

“I’m not a normal pupil though, am I? Now that we’re done with the assessment, kindly put me in a flipping house!” This was all said with quietened, controlled rage. He wanted to hit the hat over the, well, head with something in frustration but thought better of it.

“No,” the hat said calmly. “You are not a normal pupil. You hate both the light and the dark and wish to be associated with neither. Putting you in Gryffindor or Slytherin would not bode well with you.”

“Are you telling me that I don’t belong in *any* of the houses?”

"No, of course not. I am merely telling you that you are the most awkward person I have ever had to sort."

"Thanks for the info. Now pick a house!"

"Normally it is at least partially the student's decision."

"But I don't care which house you put me in!"

"You see my difficulty."

"Just sort him already! The old oaf is getting suspicious."

"Stay out of this!" Harry had to agree with Sir though. It certainly would be a little odd seeing one of the pupils taking this long to be sorted. "Remember, hat," he added threateningly. "Speak of any of this to Dumbledore and I shall personally see to it that you never sort again."

"I see you are plenty willing to carry out that threat. That does not, however, help me sort you."

This was getting ridiculous. Dumbledore would know something was up by this time and it was certain to attract unwanted attention from his peers. "Are you going to sort me or not?"

"No, you are going to choose."

"I am not!"

"You will. We've been here far too long already."

"I would like you, Mr Potter, to stand up for me."

Harry hesitated. How would *that* look if he just stood up in front of the whole school? No one else had to but then again, no one else would have left the decision completely up to the hat. Frowning slightly, he did as the hat bade.

"Good now raise your right arm, point and spin around three times."

"You want me to *what*?"

“Just hurry up and do it.”

With a great sigh he did what he was asked and spun around with his arm pointing out the way. At the other side of the hat he could here the school tittering with laughter. He stopped spinning.

“GRYFFINDOR!” the hat roared.

“What? Thanks for nothing you stupid hat!” Harry yanked the hat off his head and threw it back to the stool. It took a moment for anyone to clap for him; the students had all been talking amiably amongst themselves, very bored with the proceedings. Whispers rose up once more.

He walked towards the table that was clapping loudest that he had seen other students sorted into Gryffindor go to. Harry sat down feeling very much drained. Stealing a quick glance in the staff’s direction, he saw that Dumbledore was looking very perplexed.

There were a few more students to be sorted. After they had all been designated a house, the old man stood up. He uttered a few nonsense words (which gave Harry the impression he was not of complete sound mind) and then the marvellous gold plates before them filled with a delicious feast.

“You were *ages* under the hat,” said the busy haired girl across the table. “You must have been ten minutes. I’m Hermione Granger, by the way.”

Harry groaned audibly so she could hear. “Gods, *your* in this flipping house?”

The girl sniffed haughtily and turned away. The freckled Weasley boy Harry had met on the train then spoke to him.

“Stop being so stuck up. She was only trying to be nice.”

“Perhaps I would rather she didn’t.” It was true. Now he was stuck in a house which would no doubt be full of Rons and Hermiones, he would much rather be left alone.

“What’s wrong with you?”

He said nothing but turned to examine the food in front of him with a critical eye. Could he be sure it wasn’t tampered with? After all he had been through, Harry wouldn’t have put it past the headmaster to drug him if he suspected anything. Cautiously he picked at some food. Nothing happened so he ate a little more readily.

As soon as he put some food in his mouth he was ready to gasp in surprise. The food was, *warm*. It had been so long since he had had a warm meal! More difficult was the fact that everyone around him was digging in eagerly to the warm food with knives and forks. Harry picked his up gingerly and attempted to cut a piece of cooked – cooked! – meat with it but it was a clumsy affair and he got nowhere. Discarding the cutlery, he checked to make sure no one was watching and then simply picked up the meat with his hand and bit into it.

It did not take long for him to feel very full; he was used to living on small leftovers. By the time he felt he could eat no more, he had eaten the piece of meat and a chicken drumstick. Everyone else however, was happily digging into stacks and stacks of food. Harry turned and listened to what they were saying, having nothing better to do.

“Is he a bit senile?” a sandy haired boy was saying to a red headed prefect. No doubt it was a brother of Ron’s.

“Senile?” the prefect exclaimed, outraged. “Never! A bit eccentric, yes, but never senile! The man’s a genius! The greatest wizard alive today!”

If that’s the greatest wizard alive, thought Harry, we are all doomed. Down the table a bit some older students were discussing Harry Potter, which caught his attention fairly quickly. He hastened to listen closely.

“Wonder why his name was called out?” yet another freckle faced red head was saying.

"Maybe they expected him to be here?" said a boy, identical to the first.

A boy with dreadlocks frowned. "But surely they'd know if he would be here or not?"

"In any case," a twin voiced. "I thought he was dead."

"You know..." the other twin added thoughtfully. "We were never actually told he was dead where we?"

"Yeah!" the boy with dreadlocks said, catching on. "They just told us that loads of his blood was found and if he wasn't found quickly he'd be dead."

At this point in the discussion, the many dishes of food were wiped clean and were replaced by hoards of puddings. The three boys dug in eagerly but Harry, who was still very much full, left them to the others to devour.

"But that was years ago!" argued one of the twins.

"He'd have been caught by now if he were alive," said the other.

"Ah, but Fred," the dark haired boy muttered, his voice lowering. "What if he didn't want to be found? - I mean," he added hastily as Fred was about to interrupt. "He must have been pretty powerful to defeat You-Know-Who at the age of one. What's to stop him using his power now?"

"Don't be thick Lee. Why wouldn't he want to be found? He just wandered off by accident didn't he?"

"That's what they want you to think."

The three boys burst out laughing unexpectedly. They sobered up fairly quickly as Fred's brother said, "Do you think this means he's really dead then?"

"Could be, George. Could be."

Harry stopped listening as their conversation turned to other things and the puddings disappeared. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Dumbledore stand up and a hush fell over the school.

"Welcome," he announced. At least Harry assumed it was him; he was currently focusing on the table in front of himself. "To another year at Hogwarts school of Witchcraft and Wizardry. A few start of term announcements are in order I believe. First of all, to our new students, the forest in the grounds is strictly out of bounds. There have been many an accident there." Muttering broke out again and Harry distinctly heard his name mentioned. "This year," the man continued and silence fell again. "The third floor corridor, on the right hand side, is also off limits to those who do not wish to die a painful death."

A few people laughed. Why would the third floor corridor be out of bounds, Harry wondered. What else was the headmaster hiding? He had already hidden plenty from the general public. Like the fact that he was ready to send people to their death if he so chose. *Who do not wish to die a painful death?* What did that mean? Harry was sure that he wasn't joking. It sounded like the kind of thing the head would do. Put his pupils in danger for his own purposes. He was stopped from contemplating further as the students rose from their seats, the speech finished. None of what Dumbledore said after that had been heard by Harry and he was lucky to hear the Weasley prefect call out "First years follow me please!"

Harry and the other Gryffindor first years followed Percy the Prefect through many corridors and up many staircases. Unlike the other first years, Harry was memorising the route up so that he would not get lost. Having spent a good few years of his life living on the streets, this was not an impossible task. While he lacked in areas such as reading and writing he was much better at navigating his way and taking things without being noticed.

The group stopped before the portrait of a fat lady in a pink dress. "Password?" she asked.

"Caput Draconis," Percy said loudly and clearly.

The portrait swung open to omit them into the Gryffindor common room. As soon as he entered Harry felt the urge to shield his eyes. Everything from the walls to the chairs was either red or gold or a shade of either. He was used to greys and browns, there not being much choice for decoration in the hovels in which he had stayed before. These garish colours were enough to make any normal person wince and turn away but when Harry turned he just found himself facing more of them.

No one noticed nor cared as he left the room and climbed one of the two winding staircases up to his dormitory. Resisting the urge to groan upon entering, Harry noticed that this, too, was full of red and gold. Getting changed into his pyjamas quickly before anyone else came up, he managed to conceal his wooden arm. He kept his gloves on too, so that no one would see his wooden hand. Harry barely noticed them now; they were just like normal hands but their grip was not quite as good and he had a tendency to drop things.

He was just about to climb into the huge four poster bed that his trunk was stationed at the end of, when the door opened and the other four boys who had been sorted into Gryffindor walked in. Harry, who had turned to see who was entering, ended up knocking his wooden arm off one of the posts, which gave a dull *clunk*. Glancing nervously to see if they had noticed – he breathed a sigh of relief when he saw that they hadn't – he climbed into the large bed.

The other boys talked a little as they, too, went to bed (which Harry dutifully ignored) but they soon fell silent as they drifted into deep slumbers. It was not so easy for Harry to get to sleep however. The bedcovers were thick on top of him and the bed soft. His bed at his aunt's house hadn't been this soft surely? Eventually, when sleep still did not come, he climbed out of the bed and onto the floor, taking one of the sheets with him. Harry then proceeded to settle comfortably on the good hard floor.

At last sleep called and he drifted off into the land of nod.

xXxXxX

Harry awoke much rested after a blissful four hours sleep. It was still dark outside but there was a faint glow on the horizon. The other

boys were clearly still asleep and Harry found he much preferred them that way. He dressed and made his way downstairs into the common room, which was deserted.

Once he was settled on an armchair with his Potions book, he began to ponder. Ever since his aunt had died Harry had not been able to sleep more than five hours at most. He was unsure why but he always felt well rested after a few hours of rest. It amazed him that he used to be like everyone else and still feel tired after many more. He stared blinkingly at the page before him. There were lots of words that he did not know and more that he had to sound out before recognising them, some of which he was sure were never spoken in the non-wizarding world.

"Infusion."

Harry frowned. "Stop spewing nonsense."

"I'm not. It's pronounced in-few-shon not in-fuss-ee-on."

"Oh." Last night's events suddenly came back to him. "What happened last night?" he asked in a menacing tone, which he was very proud to say he had mastered.

"What do you mean?"

"What do you mean, 'what do I mean'?" he spat. "You were supposed to be helping me last night!"

"I was trying to, so don't you start getting all offended at me again. There were enchantments on that piece of paper which I had to remove then, when I added the name, it lingered and then disappeared!"

"Now why don't I believe you?" His sarcasm was also very well sneered now.

"I know I may not be the most trustworthy of sources but I think Dumbledore may have had something to do with it."

“Prove it then! The fact is, you said you’d help and once again you left me to die!” Harry was furious now. It was like a repeat of what had happened with the wolf. When he asked for help it didn’t come. Old suspicions made themselves known in his mind. “How do I know you aren’t lying? Why would you help me? What do you gain from this!” He was shouting and he knew he shouldn’t but Harry could not help it. It felt good to be able to shout at someone; he had so much anger built up inside of him. Anger at Dumbledore, the police, Sir, the wizard who killed his parents and surprisingly he found himself angry at Mir. Mir, who had gotten himself killed trying to help Harry. Nymph was trying to help him, would she be next?

“I can help you now.”

“And why should you? Why are you so desperate to help me!”

“I will tell you in time. Would you like me to help you?”

“What? Er...” he was surprised out of his tirade. “If your going to keep bugging me about it then, yeah, I s’pose, but how can you help me now?”

“You want to learn magic don’t you?”

Harry grinned broadly despite himself.

To Harry's dismay, Sir did not teach him anything out of the ordinary in the few hours of the morning before anyone else woke up. Indeed he journeyed down to the Great Hall for breakfast only having learnt a few basic spells from his schoolbooks. He was not unappreciative of Sir's help though, and he doubted whether he would have managed to perform them at all if Sir hadn't been guiding him. Harry did not forgive him for failing to assist the night before however, but the two of them did not speak of it again.

The Great Hall was half-full by the time Harry reached it but there were few Gryffindors. Evidently they were the ones who liked to sleep in most. Quite happily he sat down at the table away from the few sitting along it and took a piece of toast. When Harry had been staying with Aunt Petunia she had always made him breakfast; he was, after all, only eight when he left. This being the case, he had never had to butter his own before and when he picked up a knife awkwardly with his gloved hand, he ended up just dumping a slab of butter onto the toast.

Not used to eating breakfast either, Harry only managed to eat half the slice before he was full again. It really was a great help that the potion to disguise his features hid his thin body from sight. With a sigh, he took out his potions books from his bag and started to read it once more.

Unnoticed by Harry, the hall slowly began to fill with students, chattering excitedly. He did not hear the many murmurings of his name nor the rumours, which were flying back and forth between tables concerning a certain Harry Potter. He might have stayed in that position, head bent over the book, for much longer had Professor McGonagall, who was handing out timetables, not interrupted him.

"Your timetable Mister White," she said, holding out a piece of paper for him to take. As he did so Harry noticed that she was looking unusually tired and worn considering it was only the first day of term. Now that he thought about it, the other teachers at the staff table

were also looking distinctly exhausted. There was also the peculiar absence of the headmaster.

He took the piece of paper without so much as a word of thanks and Professor McGonagall moved on. It turned out that he would be seeing her in the not too distant future as he had Transfiguration first thing. He was about to get up and leave when the boy that had lost his toad, who had sat down opposite Harry without his knowledge, spoke.

“Why are you wearing gloves?” he asked.

Harry glared and said in one of his more menacing tones, “None of your business.”

The boy gave a startled squeak and fell silent, immediately busying himself with the butter.

As Harry left the Great Hall he heard one of the older students pointing another first year in the direction of Transfiguration, so he found it fairly quickly. When he arrived he was the first one there meaning that everyone else had gotten lost. Feeling pleased with himself he walked into the classroom as the bell rang and took a seat at the far side, alone.

A few seconds later, the toad boy who had asked him about his gloves ran in. Harry made a point of glaring at him so that he sat as far away as possible. A few more pupils dashed into the classroom but there was still no sign of the teacher or the rest. Minutes slowly ticked past and Professor McGonagall walked smartly in with a trail of confused first years following her.

“Well take a seat,” she barked at the unsuspecting students, who jumped in surprise and there was a mad scramble to get seats near their friends. Hermione Granger ended up sitting next to Harry as no one had made much of an effort to sit beside her either. It was hard to say which of the two was more disgruntled. When everyone was silent, Professor McGonagall began the lesson. She was definitely someone not to be crossed.

"Transfiguration is some of the most complex and dangerous magic you will learn at Hogwarts," Harry heard her say before he got too bored and stopped listening. It really was quite dull. She just droned on and on! It was all irrelevant anyway. That morning Sir had told him how to do simple Transfiguration without all this gobble-de-gook. McGonagall stopped in the middle of her lecture.

"Mister White, are you listening?"

Harry looked at her for a second before answering. "No," he said defiantly. If there was one thing Mir had taught him it was that there was nothing to fear about getting into a little trouble and that it was always funnier to tell the truth. Besides that, you could always tell what someone was like by his or her reaction to such things. There was a collective gasp by the classroom.

"Why not?" she asked sternly. It was easy to see he was about to be reprimanded. Impossible though it seemed, McGonagall seemed to grow in size.

He smiled slightly before answering coolly, "Because I find the floor so, much more interesting."

"White!" she barked and the rest of the class flinched. "You will pay attention or there will be serious consequences!"

"Like what?" Harry asked, genuinely curious. "There's no point in listening, so why should I?"

"Five points from Gryffindor for your cheek! If there's no point in listening, Mister White, kindly change this match into a needle." This had absolutely no effect on Harry, as he didn't know what house points were. No doubt McGonagall had explained it at the sorting. She handed him a small match which made his grin widen, making it much more obvious.

With a few flicks of his wand and a few chosen words, the match changed from wood to a thin silver needle. There was no doubt that it was perfect. McGonagall's lips thinned.

“You can take that stupid smirk off your face! Sit there and not another word!”

This was a little unjust, Harry thought later that lesson, because when the rest of the class attempted to change their own matches, the only person to make any difference was Hermione Granger who received one of McGonagall’s rare smiles. There it was, the corrupt justice system. Make one mistake and you’re condemned for life. Sirius’s mistake was going after Pettigrew and that had gotten him a cell in Azkaban. Harry had not forgotten that little detail and one day he was going to break Sirius out.

As soon as the class was over a couple of boys called Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnigan rounded on him.

“What’d you do that for, eh?” Dean asked roughly. “We’ll be in negative points on the first day soon!”

“Who cares?” Harry retorted nonchalantly.

“We do!” cried Seamus. “Look, you get your act together or else.”

“Or else what? You’ll go to your dear *headmaster*?” and with that Harry walked off, leaving two very confused boys behind.

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The rest of the week passed in a slow drone. Most of the lessons were incredibly dull and would not help Harry in the slightest in his quest to defeat Dumbledore. The most boring lesson was History of Magic, which was taught by a ghost. The teacher was none too attentive however, so Harry spent all those lessons reading his Defence Against The Dark Arts textbook. There was Astronomy in which they peered through telescopes attempting to learn the names of various constellations and Herbology where the students learnt to take care of all the magical plants. Now what use were those?

Charms was okay, thought Harry. It was taught by a small wizard called Professor Flitwick, who had to stand on a pile of books to see over his desk. Harry kept his mouth shut in this lesson as it could actually come in useful. Defence Against The Dark Arts was easily

the lesson he was looking forward to most. It was rather a disappointment when the lesson turned out to be a bit of a joke. The teacher was a stuttering Professor who was obviously very scared about the subject he taught.

In most lessons Harry paid no attention and made little effort, which soon made him the least popular person in first year from Gryffindor. Teachers were often giving him into trouble for it and taking points. It was on Wednesday when Harry had his first lesson of double Potions with the Slytherins.

Potions were down in the cold dungeons and Harry was the only Gryffindor to be grateful for being away from the garish colours of the castle. The class filed in moments before the bell rang. This time he found himself seated next to Neville Longbottom the round-faced boy who, whenever Harry looked at him, kept dropping things.

A hook-nosed man with greasy black hair swooped into the room, his black robes billowing out behind him. After he had taken the register, he gave a small lecture, which insulted the class's intelligence.

"Weasley!" he rounded on Ron. "What would I get if I added the powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

Ron clearly was stumped. "I don't know, Sir." Harry could not keep a small smile off his face as he saw him squirm.

"White!" the teacher turned to him.

The smile faded somewhat and Harry made sure he did not look in the professor's eyes, opting for his forehead instead. "Yeah?"

"You will address me as "Sir" or "Professor" at all times, White. Same question."

"It makes a sleeping potion, *Sir*."

"Five points from Gryffindor for your cheek! You will find, White, I have many means of dealing with insolent pupils." Harry frowned. Why did that sound familiar? Snape moved on to question some other pupils. *Many means of dealing with*. Where had he heard that

before? It certainly sounded familiar. Perhaps it was the tone of voice? Then it hit him.

"A friend who I know has many means of dealing with thieves."

Snape! It was Snape! Snape, who had been the cause of Mir's death... How he hadn't recognised him on sight was a mystery. Yet again Harry found himself losing control of his anger.

"Granger knows ask her, for God's sake!" he burst out as Snape took more points from Gryffindor when Neville Longbottom failed to answer a question.

"Ten more points, I think, Mr White," Snape called softly across the classroom. He stopped interrogating the pupils about their knowledge of potions, however, and he set them the task of concocting a simple potion to cure boils.

Harry found it incredibly difficult to so much as glance at Snape without the urge to shout something rude at him. Neville and he had to work together on the potion and Harry had to ban him from adding anything to the potion without his say so. Neville did nothing to improve his mood.

"No you thick ass! You don't add the porcupine quills until you take the cauldron *off* the fire!"

Neville dropped what he was holding and gave a frightened squeak. He hurried to shield himself from Harry.

"White!" Snape was back.

"What d'you want now?" Harry was rather quick to answer back.

Snape ignored his obvious attempt at provocation and sneered. "I don't remember gloves being on the uniform list. Take them off and it'll be another five points from Gryffindor for disregarding the uniform system."

"Nah, I'm good thanks." If he was made to take his gloves off... "Why don't you take off the mask your wearing then? That's not part of the

uniform. Oh wait, so sorry. That's your *real* nose!" It was a cheap blow but Snape's nose was unnaturally hooked.

"That's it White. I've had enough of you! Headmaster's office, now! We'll see what he has to say about you. The rest of you! Clear up. You are dismissed," he barked out orders in every direction. Harry assumed he was going to accompany him up to the office.

"I don't care what your precious *Dumbledore* has to say," he sneered in return. "He can go to hell for all I care."

Perhaps Harry had struck a nerve or Snape had recognised something he had said but whatever it was, it had made a brief change in the teacher's demeanour. For the smallest of moments a look of utter surprise passed over his face and he mouthed the word "Potter" barely moving his lips. He must have dismissed it for a second later there was no sign of these reactions.

"Follow me."

Snape led the way up through the entrance hall, along many corridors and up quite a few staircases. Harry was very familiar with the school now; he prided himself on being the only first year not to have gotten lost in the giant labyrinth that was Hogwarts Castle. Not a word was spoken between teacher and student as they marched through the well-trodden paths. Eventually they came to stop in front of a large stone gargoyle which stood glaring down at them, immobile.

Snape muttered a few chosen words so quietly that Harry did not catch them. At Snape's indication he took the lead up the winding staircase that the gargoyle had revealed by jumping aside. At the top of the moving stairs, there was a large wooden door, which Snape knocked upon three times

"Enter."

The door swung open to reveal a large circular room filled with strange silver instruments, which were spinning, emitting puffs of smoke and making all sorts of strange noises. Outlining the walls were portraits of every headmistress and headmaster the school had

ever seen. In the very centre of the room stood a large wooden desk, sitting behind which was a very old wizard.

Harry looked at the floor just as he heard, "*Remember not to make eye contact.*" He wrinkled his nose in disgust at the office. It was just the sort of thing he expected Dumbledore to have for an office.

"My, my! Whatever brings you here, Severus?" Dumbledore sounded surprised. Apparently he wasn't all knowing. Either that or he was feigning shock – a feat that Harry wouldn't put past him.

"Mister White here, has been rude, obnoxious and intolerable to his peers and myself alike and has shown a blatant disregard for school dress code," Snape drawled.

This really was a bit unfair and Harry was not going to sit and take the abuse. "Is it really my fault that your hair's too greasy to be real?" True, he hadn't actually mentioned Snape's hair before but it had the desired effect.

"Five points from Gryffindor!" he snapped causing Harry to yawn loudly and obviously. Snape looked ready to hit him.

It was now Dumbledore's turn to speak. "I believe two weeks of detention would be adequate punishment for now, providing, Jeremy, you remove your gloves."

"I will not!" Harry cried still looking resolutely at the ground.

"Insolent boy," muttered Snape.

"Snivellus." Harry was not sure what made him say it. Before he said it, he had no idea what effect it would have or the meaning behind it. It was something like a sixth sense that told him it would be a particularly spiteful thing to say to Snape. Glancing up at him, Harry saw that he had paled as far as his sallow skin would allow him and his hands were clenched in fury. Harry also felt, rather than saw, Dumbledore sitting up sharply.

This time Snape did not just mouth the words. "Potter," he snarled.

“Now, now, Professor,” Harry said tauntingly. “I think you’re confused. I was under the impression that Harry Potter was dead and that I was Jeremy White.”

“Take off the blasted gloves, White,” growled Snape.

“Severus,” Dumbledore warned in the midst of his and Harry’s glaring match. “Now, as I said, I think two weeks of detention shall be enough for now but seeing as Jeremy is so unwilling to remove his gloves we shall make it three.”

“Headmaster you know I am –“

“Yes, yes,” Dumbledore interrupted Snape impatiently. “Since you are too busy to host the detentions, Severus, I shall arrange for them to be with Professor McGonagall. You may leave.” And without another word the two of them left the office.

Harry was all for returning to his next class but Snape stopped him at the foot of the stairs. “Where did you learn that, White?”

“A little birdie told me,” he said very mysteriously and tapped the side of his nose for effect. Truth be told he had no idea how he knew it.

“I’m watching you,” leered the professor before turning to go, his robes billowing out behind him.

“Excellent!” he cried in mock delight. “Bye-bye then!” and to put the icing on the cake he waved a gloved hand goodbye.

When Harry returned to Transfiguration, his next class, he found every Gryffindor in the room ignoring him, shooting him looks of detestation or outright glaring at him. McGonagall, too, was colder than before and just pointed at his seat when he walked in. Surprisingly no points were taken for being late. What was wrong with them all now? Harry would have thought that they would be happy he was sent to the Headmaster's office to be punished but no, clearly they were not. There was simply no pleasing Gryffindors. The lesson went by as slow as ever and Harry managed to return his needle to a match long before the end of the period, which left him with absolutely nothing to do, making the time crawl by even slower. It was when the bell finally rang and he had left the classroom that Harry found out why his house disliked him more than they had before, which took quite a lot seeing as they weren't exactly the best of friends in the first place.

"Oi! White!" It was the youngest Weasley again, running to catch up.

"Oh," said Harry in a bored voice. "It's you again."

The rest of their dorm mates were standing boldly behind Ron. This clearly boosted his confidence, as Harry was pretty sure that he would never have dared say the things to his face that he was about to say if he weren't backed up by four others. Talk about Gryffindor bravery, he thought. "Well I hope you're happy," Ron declared.

"Well I was rather until I saw your ugly face but I suppose it's not your fault you were born looking like that. I suppose it's inherited?" Now he'd done it. Ron went as scarlet as his hair but whether it was from embarrassment or anger, Harry couldn't tell.

"Now you look here, White. Gryffindor have *zero* points now and it's thanks to you! We told you to watch your step and you didn't. Now, White, you will face the consequences."

It was a remarkable sentiment Harry had to admit. Unfortunately for Ron, he was completely unfazed by it; he had had far worse threats from people on the streets and had far worse ones seen through. It

was highly unlikely that Ron would be able to do anything besides insult him. This being the case, Harry could not help but laugh.

“Oh *good luck*. I’m sure you and your wee body guards will have such *fun*.” Still laughing, he turned to go.

“All right then White! Wizard’s Duel, tonight, you and me.”

Having no idea what a Wizard’s Duel was, Harry felt it only appropriate to accept. A duel was a fight, he knew, but what a Wizard’s duel was, was beyond him. Still, he was good at fighting and Ron knew so little magic he’d only be able to send sparks at him. Harry, however, had his knife and Nymph’s present, a gun. He gave a brief nod of consent.

Ron looked astonished. “Erm, alright then.” He regained his composure. “Dean’s my second. Who’s yours?”

“I don’t need one.” Although he appeared so confident inside he was a bundle of confusion. What exactly was he agreeing to? He only hoped he didn’t need a “second” whatever they were.

“What’s a wizard’s duel?” Harry mentally thanked Dean for being muggle-born.

“It’s a wands only fight with no contact allowed. Seconds are only there to take over if you die,” informed Seamus.

Well out the window flew the knife idea. Unless he could levitate it at Ron... Would it count if he shot a gun at him? Technically Harry wasn’t making any contact.

“Right then, Hart – I mean White- whatever your name is, tonight at midnight sound good to you? Or would you rather it be in the day time so that someone can recover your body?” Although Ron was doing a pretty good job of acting tough, it was fairly easy to see how nervous he was.

“Man this is getting thick,” Harry replied and it was too. Whatever happened to a good old fight?

“Scared?”

This caused him to laugh out loud. “You wish Weasel Boy. How about a fight at lunch so there’s plenty of witnesses of my winning?”

Ron paled drastically. “F-fine then. Beside the lake at lunchtime. See you White.” He stalked off head held high and the other four boys followed obediently.

The Charms lesson that came next could not have gone slower for Harry. He was eagerly awaiting lunchtime, the time in which he would finally have a good source of stress relief, a live punching bag. All through the lesson Ron would stare pointedly at Harry and make rude gestures. Flitwick, who caught Ron in his antics, had to settle for reprimanding him; Gryffindor had no points left to take. When at last the bell for lunch rang, Harry could not hasten down to the lake fast enough.

He arrived there several minutes before anyone else and so, had time to think out a plan. Ron would be hungry; he was the sort of boy who just ate and ate and that would distract him, Harry knew. He was also struggling somewhat in classes whereas Harry had learned a few spells from Sir. There was also his gun strapped to his leg and his knife in his pocket. Hopefully he would not need to use his gun. It was, after all, best to have a few tricks up his sleeve, erm, leg.

Quite a number of first years arrived at the scene, including a few members from each of the houses. How they knew about the fight, Harry’s guess was as good as any. A couple of older students who noticed the gathering also came over to watch. Last to reach the lake was Ron, his freckles standing out horribly against his pale skin.

“O-on the count of three?” the red head asked.

“Sure you don’t need longer Weasel boy?”

“One!” Ron called. Harry yawned. “Two!” He twirled his wand between his fingers.

“Three!” He stood perfectly still watching Ron, who did not move.

“Planning on fighting Weasel? I’ll even let you throw the first spell, if you know any.”

His opponent flushed bringing a bit of colour into his cheeks. “How... *generous* of you.”

Still he didn’t move.

“Well?” Harry asked growing rather impatient. He had to know *some* spell didn’t he?

“Petrificus!” Ron shouted rather suddenly, wand raised.

It was a rather weak spell and Harry had time to side step it and return with a spell of his own. “Tallantalegra!” he cried. It hit Ron squarely in the chest and his legs began to dance of their own accord. Maybe he wouldn’t need to use his knife after all...

“Petrificus!” Weasley yelled again, panic lining every word as he stared down at his dancing legs in horror.

Yet again the spell bypassed Harry though this time he hadn’t moved an inch. This was only too easy. “Wingardium Leviosa!” He said rather lazily and the Weasley boy shot into the air with his legs still jerking.

“White! Put me down!”

In response Harry made him roll over in the air and hovered him over the lake.

“White!” Ron was clearly terrified.

Grinning like a madman, very aware of the boo’s and shouts he was receiving from the watching crowd, Harry made the boy fall into the ice cold water and let him fly back into the air after a few seconds under the water. He was drenched, shivering and coughing violently.

“Hey! Put our brother down!” It was the Weasley twins, Fred and George, sprinting towards him from the castle. One of them rammed

into Harry from the side, causing him to drop his wand and let Ron plummet into the lake.

The crowd gasped in surprise. Fred launched a punch at Harry who ducked and responded with a wild kick. Fred staggered backwards when his shin was hit rather hard. George took the opening and attempted to kick Harry while he was on the ground. He had been anticipating this though and quickly sprung to his feet and punched George in the face.

The exact details of what happened the rest of the fight were never quite clear to Harry. All he really remembered was a lot of kicking, shouting, punching and swearing. Somehow Fred managed to get Harry in a leg lock in the middle of the flying limbs and George ended up pinned under them. Having no idea how he had gotten out of the situation, Harry was off the ground with a firm grip around George's head and one of his legs was being held by Fred who had caught it when he had attempted to kick his stomach. There was no sign of Ron.

A well aimed kick on Harry's part, freed his other leg from Fred and then, somehow, also managed to hit George in the stomach. Both twins fell to the ground leaving Harry to stand over them, merely breathing only slightly harder than normal. His years on the streets had not left him defenceless even against two older boys.

It was in that position that a furious Professor McGonagall found them. Her lip was so thin it was almost non-existent. "Never – in – all – my – years- at – Hogwarts!" she shouted whilst hurrying towards them. "Have – I – been –"

"Professor..." moaned George faintly.

"Do not interrupt me! You are in serious trouble! The headmaster will hear –"

"But Professor..." Fred cried desperately. "Where's Ron?"

McGonagall's eyes widened and her mouth fell open slightly. "What about him?"

“He fell into the lake,” the twins whispered in unison. Harry remained silent and examined the cloudy sky. Professor McGonagall and the twins turned to look at the lake as one. There was no disturbance on the surface.

McGonagall drew her wand worriedly and muttered something that Harry did not quite catch. Instantly a gangly body rose from the depths of the water. It flew through the air towards them and stopped just before McGonagall.

“You three!” she barked at the twins and Harry. “Hospital Wing, now!” And levitating Ron, she strode towards the castle leading the way. Harry and the twins hastened to follow, the idea of disobeying never once entering their heads.

Upon entering the Hospital Wing the strict nurse bustled over and immediately set Ron on a bed for inspection. With a wave of her hand she signalled that the other three go sit on a bed and not bother her whilst she was examining Ron. Once Harry was seated on a bed by the window, as far away from the Weasleys as possible (the twins had taken the beds nearest Ron’s), he looked more closely at the nurse. She was strict certainly but she was also kindly looking. Harry frowned. It wasn’t the same nurse who was here the last time was it? The one who had unintentionally let Harry escaped? The witch in question turned slightly so he got a better look at her face. There was no doubt about it; it was the one and same Madam Pomfrey.

Harry turned to the window and gazed out over the extensive grounds. They were just as beautiful as the last time he had looked out from that window a year or so ago. The only difference was the students littering the grass. The lake was as large and glittery as before and like that time so long ago the grass was swaying gently in the breeze. The forest stood dark and tall still, and yet again Harry had to fight the urge to run out the room and into its vast depths. He turned round as Madam Pomfrey finished attending to Ron.

“He has suffered a fracture to the skull,” she said to McGonagall. “And has inhaled much water. I have amended his skull but unfortunately due to the severity of the injury he has gone into a minor coma and should wake in a few days time.”

It wasn't the first time Harry had put someone into a coma in a fight; he vaguely remembered a couple of years ago when the boy he had been fighting had smashed his head off the ground when Harry tripped him up. This time it was much more satisfying. If Ron hadn't been prepared for pain he shouldn't have agreed to a fight with Harry.

McGonagall, seemingly satisfied, left the room but not before ordering the Weasley twins and Harry to stay put after they had been seen to. Evidently she would be back.

Madam Pomfrey turned to heal Fred, whose eye was already black and lip was burst, and George with his swollen wrist and cut face. Overall, thought Harry, he had come off pretty well. He only had a deep cut on his forehead which was still bleeding profusely, letting blood run down the side of his face making it look much worse than it was. Surprisingly the cut was exactly where his lightning bolt scar would be had he not been disguised. Madam Pomfrey wasn't to know this of course and she healed it with a flick of her wand and cleaned up the blood.

Immediately after Madam Pomfrey declared them all fit to leave, Professor McGonagall reappeared, Dumbledore in tow. "I hope you three realise the severity of the situation," she growled, looking round them.

"I want you three to know that I am sorely disappointed in you," Dumbledore contributed. His voice was low, and calm. Had Harry cared what Dumbledore thought, it would have been worse than him shouting at the three of them.

"I would have liked to deduct points but it appears that we have none to take," as she said this McGonagall openly glared at them. "This being the case, I have no choice but to award Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff and Slytherin fifty points."

"Fifty!" Fred – or was it George? – cried in dismay.

"Each," she added.

Dumbledore took over. "You will each receive three weeks detentions as an additional punishment. That makes your total six weeks Mister White."

"I can add you know," Harry could not help but reply.

"I'm sorry I meant to say six and a half weeks," Dumbledore corrected himself and Harry glared furiously at his nose. "You will find boys that fighting is not tolerated at Hogwarts as is impertinence. Good day," and with that said he turned and left the ward with McGonagall at his heels.

It did not take long for the nurse to usher them out of the Hospital Wing and separate the twins from Ron. No sooner had the door closed behind them than Fred and George cornered Harry. It seemed to be happening quite a lot.

"You're going to pay –" started one of them.

"For what you did to Ron," finished the other.

"You do know he was the one who wanted to fight me?" Harry asked calmly leaning back against the wall.

"You do know you're the one who put him in a coma?" mocked a twin.

"Puh-lease," said Harry. "I've seen Hell and worse and there ain't nothing that you can do to me that would compare to it."

"Oh really?" the other twin said slyly.

"Believe us, White, Hell is nothing compared to what we'll do to you." The two Weasley boys walked off leaving Harry leaning against the wall.

By dinner time it was all over the school that Harry had put Ron into a coma. The school buzzed with the news and Harry could not go anywhere without someone staring at him, whispering or pointing. His dorm mates were even more hostile towards him than before, if that was even possible. The four boys sat at dinner glaring at him, as did the Weasleys and various other people. The Slytherin table was

oddly quiet and many curious glances found their way to Harry from there.

For a school with such a good reputation, he thought, there was an awful lot of hostility. Not just towards him, either. The Slytherin table was often at the end of the disdainful looks, which was rather odd as, since Harry had arrived at Hogwarts a week ago, they had done nothing. That made little sense; the new Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs were not treated with hate like Malfoy and the other Slytherin first years were. At least Harry had done something to make everyone loath him.

The many threats he had received did not bother him in the slightest. It wasn't like they were actually going to see them through! Later that night as he prepared for bed, Harry realised that he was wrong, very wrong indeed.

Harry climbed into bed preparing for a long uncomfortable wait. Each night he would simply lie there until the rest of the dorm's occupants fell asleep so that he could sleep on the floor in peace. One would have thought that he would grow accustomed to the soft bed with its thick covers but no, not Harry. The bed was just as uncomfortable as the first night he had slept in it. Though he only ever got a few hours sleep, Harry needed it. It was still a mystery to him how some people could sleep for hours and hours. He went to sleep after everyone else and he woke long before them which was when Sir would teach him some spells out of his books. That night it was no different and he lay under the heavy covers thinking.

There were only three of the four roommates in the dorm, Ron still lying unconscious in the Hospital Wing, and they should still have gone to sleep fairly quickly. What surprised Harry was that rather than the heavy even breathing of three sleepers, they were all breathing softly, clearly awake, long after they would normally have fallen asleep. It was then that he felt it. He had felt something a few minutes before but it had been so slight that Harry had put it down to his imagination.

It was cold and creeping up under the bed sheets. It brushed over one of Harry's legs and then the next. He didn't move. The thing, whatever it was, moved up towards his torso. He could still feel it on his legs. How big could it be? It slid over his stomach. Harry was frozen in fear. The creature found his arm. Its breath breezed the hair on his arm. It must have opened its mouth...

"ARGH!" Harry gave an almighty yell and scrambled out of the bed as fast as he could. At least he tried to. When he tried to dislodge his ankle from the tangled mess that had become his bed sheets he realized, to his terror, that he couldn't. The creature had somehow caught a firm hold around his foot.

Harry could hear the laughter of his peers.

He struggled to break free of the thing. It held fast. He was becoming more and more panicked with each passing moment. It had opened

its mouth again. Harry finally realised what the thing was when he heard a great low hiss.

“Ssstupid humanssss. Why have they put me here? Where isss here?”

Harry almost fainted in his relief. It was a snake! If he just asked it to leave him alone...

“Ssnake,” he hissed, completely unaware of the looks of horror on the faces of the three boys who had moments before been laughing. **“Could you please release my leg?”**

Even though the answer to this terrible predicament had presented itself, the panic was still writhing around inside of him.

“You speak!” the snake hissed in surprise and it uncoiled itself from Harry’s leg but did not back away. **“Will you take me back to the forest?”**

“As soon as I can,” he promised and the panic subsided. Only then did he see the looks upon the other boys’ faces.

Suddenly, as if by magic, which it probably was, the torches on the walls flickered into life illuminating the room. There was Harry, his foot slightly purple from the tightness of the snake’s grasp, holding the great snake in his gloved hands. It was a considerable size, possibly six foot and it was an amazing feat that it had sat in his bed for so long without him realising. Dean, Neville and Seamus were sitting up in their beds. Each of them had a look of horror, anger and loathing upon their faces and it was perfectly clear whom they were directed to.

“What the hell are you up to, White?” Dean roared furiously. “Go back to Slytherin where you belong!”

“You-you’re a *Parselmouth*?” squeaked Neville in surprise and, quite understandably, fear. “Bu-but that’s the sign of a dark wizard!”

“Only Slytherin’s descendants can speak Parseltongue,” Seamus continued. “You must be related to him, ruddy Slytherin!”

“I’m not sharing a dorm with a Slytherin!” shouted Dean. “Leave now! Before you start attacking us all! Did you see what he did to Ron?”

Harry remained silent throughout their ramblings, stroking the snake. Even when they were all shouting at him in anger he could not bring himself to care about their opinions. One day he would reveal himself as Harry Potter and then they would all regret the day they showed prejudice against Parselmouths, with him at the brunt of it. After all, what did it matter what they thought? If they were “budding chums” as he was sure Dumbledore would like them to be, Harry would probably kill them indirectly. No doubt it would be Dumbledore who caused their deaths in the first place. But if Dumbledore were not around...

He was stopped from thinking further along this line when the door to the dormitory opened unexpectedly and Percy and some other boys walked in.

“What is the meaning of all this noise?” Percy demanded authoritatively. “It’s after one in the morning!”

“White’s a Parselmouth!” Dean said quickly before anyone else had the chance. “Look he’s got a snake!”

“I –“ Harry tried to object but Percy cut him off.

“Now really! Snake’s aren’t allowed as pets anymore. I am going to Professor McGonagall first thing in the morning to inform her,” he addressed Dean in particular after this. “Unless arrangements are made, you are to share a dorm with White, Parseltongue or not! I want no more noise from this dormitory. Now all of you! Go to bed!” Percy the Prefect left the room and the boys standing behind him did likewise.

The other three boys climbed obediently back into bed but not before Seamus muttered. “I’m not staying in a room with a Parselmouth. Tomorrow I’m going to have a little word with McGonagall myself.”

That morning Harry woke in the early hours as per usual but this time, rather than stay in the common room for instruction from Sir, he dressed and left Gryffindor Tower with the large snake slithering along beside him. It wasn’t really all that necessary for him to

accompany the snake to the forest but there were certain obstacles (doors) that it could not get passed without the aid of a human being.

The way down and out of the Entrance Hall was undisturbed and once they were out in the open air Harry breathed in a deep sigh. The air inside the castle just wasn't quite the same as the air without, the air that he was so much more used to. Together the snake, hissing contentedly, and he made their way towards the looming trees. The snake wasn't the only one to be itching to roam through the forest by this time. The old alluring feeling had returned full throttle at Harry; if only he could return to that dark forest! They reached the edge of the trees.

"Are you okay from here on your own?" he asked the snake. Truth be told, he did not really want to return to the forest. If he returned he was not sure he would have the willpower to leave again.

The snake looked up at Harry and, if it were possible, it was with a hurt and scared look. **"Can't you just accompany me a bit further?"** she, for Harry was sure it was a she, hissed.

About to refuse, he was very astonished to hear himself say softly, **"Okay."** What was he doing? He couldn't go back in to the "Forbidden Forest"! Last time it was all right, he was running away. What was the worst that could happen? Well the worst that had happened last time was he had lost his right arm but he had gone really far into the forest then. There was little chance Harry would go in that far again. Besides, this way he would get away from the school for a while.

The snake led the way into the trees and Harry followed without complaint. Once they were well into the forest, he could not help but take a great breath. The smell of the trees! If only he did not have to leave. No, he told himself sharply. He could not stay there; he had revenge to take. It did not stop the feeling of utter joy Harry felt at being concealed in the foliage. There was no one that would get hurt from knowing him here. No one would bother him. There was not a soul who stared and muttered about him in the trees. Ron was not here to bother him nor the rest of the Weasley boys nor his dorm mates. There was just him and the trees. Harry was happy there.

Without seeing the snake stop, he tripped over her. Harry fell face first into a bush. He was even happier that there were no students to see him. A pair of hands grasped his shoulders and hoisted him to his feet. His body tensed, Harry turned around slowly and relaxed as he saw the familiar face of Jacques, the centaur. Though Harry looked completely different since their last encounter, Jacques seemed to recognise him. Jacques however, looked no different since the day they first met.

"I believe," said the centaur serenely. "That the last time we met, Harry Potter, you agreed to provide me with information once you returned to you kind, did you not?"

He nodded numbly. What could he possibly know that this intelligent creature did not?

"In recent events there is something I need more. There is an item, hidden in the third floor of the school, which, if left in tact, is a great danger to all. It is the Philosopher's Stone. As this was not part of our original agreement, I shall agree to help you once more when you see fit. Will you agree to fetch me the Philosopher's Stone?"

As the centaur talked, Harry's bottom jaw dropped steadily lower and lower. Steal from under Dumbledore's nose? Did Jacques think he was a God or something? But he really had no choice and he knew it. There was little way Harry could refuse; Jacques would probably take the wooden arm back and then Harry would be in a bit of trouble. No, he would have to agree.

"Okay."

Jacques smiled triumphantly. "I will warn you this, Harry Potter. Do not attempt to take it too soon. You must learn some more magic before you have a chance. One more piece of advice before you go: the first obstacle is a three-headed dog that falls to sleep at the sound of music. Goodbye, Harry Potter." And the centaur walked off through the trees and out of sight.

By this time the snake was long gone and the sun was newly risen. Harry had no idea which direction the school was in and he didn't

care all that much though he knew he would have to return. With a heavy heart, he set off.

Later, when the sun was much higher, Harry sank to the ground in utter frustration. It was almost as if the forest didn't *want* him to leave! He would walk out of the clearing and no sooner would it be out of sight than it would be in front of him again. He had tried everything; going out from different sides, walking backwards, drawing arrows in the ground so that he was sure he wasn't just going through different clearings. Harry had even drawn a face on the ground that looked surprisingly like Dumbledore then stood on it with his foot. When he had climbed a tree in his attempts to escape the clearing he had ended up falling out and bruising his ankles.

Indeed, as Harry lay staring at the blue sky high above he felt a great deal of irritation at the forest though he still longed to stay there for ever. Why was nothing ever simple? It was difficult to say which he felt more when he saw Severus Snape walk into the clearing, hate, despair or depression.

"Mr Potter," said Snape with glee. "Not running away again were we?"

"Okay for one," Harry said with a glare at Snape's forehead. "I ain't Harry Potter so I can't run away *again* and for two, I weren't running away."

"Forgive me if I find that hard to believe. I can't fathom a reason you would be here if you weren't running away. You, in particular, should know that this forest is full of dangers."

"Oh I know it is." It suddenly occurred to him that he should get off the ground. He did so then continued. "There are wolves in here you know." Harry knew that Snape knew that he was Harry Potter but frankly he didn't care. There was little chance Dumbledore would believe him so Harry was free to taunt him all he liked. "And not that it's any of *your* business but I was returning a snake."

A flicker of surprise passed over Snape's face before his mask of indifference returned. "And what, pray tell, where you doing with a snake?"

Harry smirked. "And I believe that is for me to know and you to not."

"I suppose you don't care that the school is in uproar now that one of its pupils has vanished?"

"Wow, seriously? Man you need to keep tabs on people."

Snape looked livid and Harry was enjoying it. Snape seemed incredibly easy to annoy. "Shall we go then, *White*?"

"Oh it's easy for you to say. You think I'm staying here for a siesta?"

"What are you talking about now?" asked Snape irritably.

"Watch." To demonstrate Harry walked out of the clearing backwards, watching Snape who was standing with his arms folded looking more like a bat than ever. Once he was out of view, Harry found himself walking backwards into the clearing from the other end. "Ta da!" he said like a magician performing an amazing trick.

Snape frowned and walked out of the clearing. He did not reappear once he was out of sight. A few minutes passed then Snape returned exactly where he had left. Arching an eyebrow, he commanded, "Come with me, *White*. We are returning to the castle."

Together they walked out of the clearing, side by side, but when Harry walked back in Snape was not there. Moments later he did return and looking more perplexed than anything. "Again, *White*." This time Snape grasped Harry's shoulder roughly and forced him to walk in front.

Once the clearing was out of sight the most unpleasant feeling Harry had ever experienced occurred. It felt like he was being stretched and thinned out by a medieval torturing machine. His lungs were being compressed along with the rest of his body and each breath came as a deep struggling wheeze. The legs beneath Harry gave way but he did not fall. Snape's grip on his shoulder had become a hand on each of his shoulders and it was so strong it was holding him up. Slowly, very slowly, the feeling came to pass and Harry did collapse. The air was taken in deep gulps as his lungs refilled themselves.

“Get up, White,” Snape told him harshly as if it were his fault.

Harry was shaking quite noticeably but got up nonetheless. Did that mean it was over? Was he allowed to leave? He took the look Snape gave him as ‘Get going’ and took a step forwards. Nothing happened. Breathing a deep sigh of relief Harry continued to walk out of the shelter of the trees with Snape in tow.

The rest of the journey passed without event and Snape and Harry spent the time in each other’s *pleasant* company. They spoke little and when they did it was only to share a few snide remarks. Needless to say, they were not the best of friends. When at last they reached the castle Snape directed Harry towards the headmasters office. Along the way they passed many students most of whom made sure to whisper words of hate towards Harry. Among the many they passed were the Weasley twins who were looking especially malevolent; it was clear to him that they were up to something a bit worse than homework. Finally they arrived at the stone gargoyle that defended Dumbledore’s office. They entered, stepped onto the moving staircase, knocked on the door at the top and entered Dumbledore’s office.

Dumbledore was pacing his office, his head bent low, when Harry and Snape entered. He seemed not to notice their presence and Snape had to cough indiscreetly. Startled, Dumbledore's head shot up and he visibly relaxed upon seeing them standing there. He looked older than ever.

"Mister White! Thank heavens you are all right! We feared the worst. It simply does not do to have students disappearing for hours on end without a trace. What a good thing it was that Severus found you! But what were you doing on your own in the Forbidden Forest?" All this was said amazingly quickly and it took Harry a minute to register that he had been spoken to at all. Fixating on Dumbledore's nose he managed not to lose his temper and grind out,

"For your information I was returning the snake which was so pleasantly found in my bed."

Even Snape looked bewildered.

"But what, Mister White, was the snake doing in your bed?" asked Dumbledore.

Snape however had a different question to ask and asked it slowly and softly. "How did you know to put it in the forest and why then, did it not attack you?"

"Because I'm smarter than you think and I don't really like being attacked by snakes." Though this answer was very crude Harry had the feeling that Snape understood it perfectly. Dumbledore, on the other hand, took it as more of his cheek and did not hesitate to deduct house points. It didn't really matter what he said anyway, thought Harry. If the rest of his housemates carried out their threats, McGonagall would know soon enough that he was a Parselmouth and would, in turn, inform Dumbledore.

As if right on cue, the door to the office flew open and McGonagall, Dean and Seamus walked in. Harry gave a cheery little wave to the two boys who merely glared in return.

“Professor Dumbledore,” McGonagall said, ignoring the fact that Dumbledore had, moments before, been completely occupied with Harry and Snape. “These boys have told me that they do not wish to stay in the same dorm as Mister White.”

Dumbledore peered interestedly over the top of his half-moon spectacles at Dean and Seamus. “And why are they so set against it?”

“Professor Dumbledore, Sir,” burst Seamus before McGonagall could open her mouth. “He’s a Parselmouth! He had a snake last night and was going to make it attack us all! He might attack us all while we’re asleep!”

“What makes you think I’m going to wait until you’re asleep?” asked Harry softly. It was pointless to try and correct Dumbledore about the snake; there was no way he’d believe Harry over them.

“Mister White!” McGonagall admonished.

“Is this true?” the headmaster asked.

“No,” Harry said calmly. The teachers visibly relaxed but Dean and Seamus opened their mouths, about to protest. “I’m not going to attack them in their sleep.”

“I’m afraid boys,” Dumbledore said, ignoring the fact that Harry had avoided the question. “That at present time there is no way for you to sleep in separate dorms. If you do not wish to sleep in the same room the only alternative is for you to sleep in your common room.” He then turned and addressed Harry. “Mister White, this is the third time I have had to speak to you about misbehaviour. I believe another two weeks detention is in order. If you do not receive any more detentions between now and then your detentions should end in the second week of November.”

“Can I go?” Harry asked with a little more than a hint of impatience in his voice. Honestly, he thought, you’d think he’d put another boy in a coma with all the fuss they were making.

Sighing the headmaster dismissed them.

It surprised Harry greatly to learn that it was already lunchtime. He had managed to miss the whole of the morning and breakfast without noticing it. Could time have really gone by so fast? As he sat in the Great Hall, students were giving him a wider berth than ever before and some even scuttled out of the way when he sat down at the Gryffindor table. Evidently they knew he could speak to snakes.

It soon became unbearable to sit amidst the whispers and wary looks and once he was finished nibbling on a sandwich, Harry left the hall to wander up to the owlery. Harry had been astonished and somewhat frightened when his first breakfast at Hogwarts had been interrupted by scores of owls flying in to deliver letters and parcels. He learnt fairly quickly that this was the common mode of transport for letters and decided that Nymph would appreciate hearing from him.

A very untidy letter was scrawled; Harry's writing had not improved much since his aunt had died and he had stopped attending school and so it was disjointed, large and untidy and each letter was printed on its own instead of being joined with the one next to it. He left the letter unsigned, unaddressed and did not put many details in it. Overall it was a pretty poor excuse for a letter but who knew who might read it? Sending it off with one of the school owls he started back along the corridors wondering what he was going to do for the rest of the afternoon.

It was when Harry was walking along the Charms corridor that he heard a voice that made him stop in his tracks to eavesdrop.

"Headmaster, if you had heard-

"I don't care what you heard Severus. I find it simply impossible that he may be here at Hogwarts." Clearly Dumbledore and Snape were talking but why they didn't host a conversation such as this one in more private a place was anyone's guess.

"How else then do you explain his abilities?"

"It is a rare occurrence to be able to speak Parseltoungue but not unheard of. Certainly it has never reached my ears of anyone other

than the descendants of Slytherin but I do not believe it is anything more than a coincidence.”

“You believe that everything else is a coincidence too?”

“I do Severus,” here Dumbledore’s tone became sharper. “Let the past die, Severus. He is dead. Your childhood grudges shall do you no good to brood upon.”

“What about White then? You believe his attitude is normal for a boy in first year?”

“I have spent many a year here at Hogwarts. I have seen it all. He is a boy going through the stage of adolescence and nothing more.”

“But what-“

“Enough! We have talked long enough about this. I beg you Severus, to think no more about Mister White. He’s just a boy. Leave him be. Good day, Severus.” The sound of receding footsteps reached Harry’s ears and he deemed it safe to walk round the corner. Standing in the middle of the corridor, was Snape.

“White! What are you doing here?” growled Snape before Harry had quite reached him.

“I didn’t realise it was a crime to walk in the corridors,” he replied, perfectly innocently. Really he *could* have just been walking in the corridor but Harry was fairly certain that Snape knew this wasn’t the case.

“Five points from Gryffindor!”

Harry smirked. “Didn’t believe you, did he? So what’s this childhood grudge I heard about?”

“You can’t hide forever Potter,” said Snape softly. “And mark my words, I *will* be the one to uncover you.” He walked off with his robes billowing out behind him.

Harry spent the rest of the day searching the castle for another room in which Sir could teach him his spells. Sir had continued to teach him in the early hours of the morning and they were making slow but sure progress but that was probably a good thing, thought Harry. The few spells he had learnt, he had learnt well and so was able to perform them perfectly. It was more than a tad risky to be practising in the Gryffindor common room; some students might get up and go into the common room while he was talking to Sir. The attempts to find a room were fruitless however and by the end of the day Harry was feeling very much exhausted having wandered over the school for so long.

When he returned to the Gryffindor common room that night a giant hush fell over the many pupils sitting in it when he entered. The whole room turned to look at him as one and Harry could not resist but call "Boo!" causing a girl to shriek. Laughing he made his way up to his dormitory to study one of his books and noticed that people edged away as he walked by.

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The next day he continued his long search for a new room to practise in but again with no luck. Students kept scuttling out of his way when he walked down the corridor and he had great fun in making hissing sounds as he walked by. When Harry had been casually eavesdropping on some students he had found out that when he talked to snakes he was actually talking in hisses. He had also found out that Ron was awake and was just staying in the Hospital Wing as a precautionary measure.

McGonagall stopped him in the corridor to inform him that he would be serving detention with Fred, George and Ron, who was due to come out of the Hospital Wing, the next day. Harry replied with a sarcastic comment of "I can't wait."

These detentions turned out to be a variety between cleaning classrooms to writing lines. All throughout them, Fred and George would pass each other messages and Ron would spend the whole time glaring at Harry. Harry himself spent the time speculating about

what George and Fred would attempt to do to him, if they carried out their threats.

Ron returned to the dormitory but his demeanour had definitely changed. Instead of openly insulting Harry, he would stop talking whenever he entered a room and always took great care at avoiding him. He was used to this, of course. It was the attitude many had developed around him after they had seen him fight on the streets.

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Thursday dawned bright and cheerfully but Harry's mood was far from cheery. He was slightly on edge and could not focus properly when Sir attempted to teach him the full body bind spell in the common room. He was practising on Ron's rat, Scabbers, when Sir asked about it.

"Boy, what is wrong with you today? This is an easy spell."

Harry frowned and attempted it again and failed. "I can't concentrate."

"Why not? It is pointless for me to teach someone who is incapable of being taught."

"I've got to have flying lessons today." Scabbers squeaked and tried to run away again only to find himself barricaded in by a stack of books.

"So? That is no excuse! Concentrate! What's wrong with flying lessons?"

"I don't do heights. Someone chucked me off a building a couple of years ago. Petrificus Totalus!" Yet again nothing happened.

"Foolish boy. Fear gets you nowhere! I didn't get where I did by being scared."

"What, being a disembodied spirit who follows me around? Petrificus Totalus! Ergh, why isn't this working!"

"I'll have you know I'm much more than a disembodied spirit! Boy, watch and learn! You are incompetent! Petrificus Totalus!" Scabbers gave one last squeak and then could move no more.

Harry's anger rekindled itself immediately. "I thought you couldn't do magic!"

"I never said that."

"No but you didn't exactly 'elp me when I were bein' eaten alive! What 'appened then eh?" Somehow, passed all his hard efforts, now that he was angry again he couldn't help but talk like he did on the streets. Most of the time he tried desperately hard to avoid it; that would make things a bit *too* obvious for Dumbledore.

"I will explain that when the time is right! For now, go down to breakfast. Someone is coming down the stairs."

Wasting no more time Harry hurried out of the portrait hole and made his way to the Great Hall. Breakfast was not out yet but there were already a few pupils dotted around the hall most of them doing what Harry was about to do, read a book.

Little by little the hall filled with students and the breakfast was laid out. He was just taking a sip of pumpkin juice when something peculiar happened.

He couldn't breath. His throat felt like it had swollen to enormous proportions and blocked all chances that air had of reaching his lungs. Try as he might he could not get any air in. Why did everything he did have to involve him not breathing? Stars began to dance in front of Harry's eyes. If he didn't breath soon he would suffocate. He was beginning to feel light headed. Oh for a breath of air! Strength was ebbing away from his body. What was going on? Why couldn't he breath this time? The top of his heavy, heavy head felt like it was on fire. It was too heavy. He couldn't hold it up any longer. He slumped over the table quite unconscious.

When Harry became conscious again he was still with his head on the table in the exact same position. In fact, he must have only been unconscious for a few seconds, a minute at most. There was one big

difference though; he could breathe. Deep shuddering breaths but breaths they were. Sitting up, shaking slightly, Harry ran a distracted hand through his messy hair.

"I don't understand," he heard someone to his right mutter. "It was supposed to put him in a ballet costume and make him... not..."

Harry turned and rounded on the speaker. It was George sitting beside Fred. "You two! You're the ones who almost flipping *killed* me? You have crossed a line and you will never cross back! *I will have my revenge.*" And Harry stormed out of the great hall, oblivious to the many students staring at his hair.

By the time he had reached the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom, he was fuming. Already Harry was plotting ways to take his revenge. He could put a mild poison in their food... no they had done that it would look like copying. He could set a snake on them... that would be a bit too obvious. What could he do?

Hermione Granger was staring at him.

"What?" he asked sharply when he saw her. Hermione was always there, prepared to annoy everyone, not just him, to their fullest. Not only was she bossy, but she was an insufferable know-it-all much like the one that had attended Harry's primary school.

"What did you do to your hair?"

"Nothing! Go away!"

"But – but look!" She pulled out a small mirror from her bag and gave it to him.

Warily Harry took it from her and gasped as he saw his hair's reflection. His hair was no longer as evenly cut and reddish brown. Instead it was the black roughly cut it was before; the only difference was that there were now green highlights running through it. It was really quite cool. Making a mental note to thank Fred and George, he tossed the mirror to the ground where it smashed.

“Oh!” cried Hermione and she bent over the pieces and repaired them with her wand.

“Don’t waste my time you stupid twit,” he said just as the bell rang.

Harry took his usual seat away from everyone else and opened his Defence book to read whilst Professor Quirrell stuttered out a lecture.

Lunchtime came far too quickly for Harry and, before he knew it, that too was over and it was time to venture out into the grounds for his first flying lesson. It was a clear, breezy day and the grass rippled under his feet as Harry walked down towards a smooth lawn on the opposite side of the grounds to the Forbidden Forest, whose trees were swaying darkly in the distance.

Nearly everyone was there already, the only exception being Hermione Granger. Twenty long, thin broomsticks were also there lying neatly on the ground beside the students. Harry gulped and ran a nervous hand through his hair.

The flying instructor was Madam Hooch, a woman with short, grey hair and hawk-like eyes. “What are you all waiting for?” she barked. “Stand by a broomstick!” Everyone scrambled to obey her except Harry who sauntered over to the last broomstick, which was particularly old looking. Once they were all standing to attention she ordered them to place one hand over the broomstick they were next to and call “up!”

The grounds were immediately filled with cries of “Up!” but few brooms moved into the hands of the students. Harry’s was one of the few that did but others’ (like Hermione’s) brooms simply rolled over.

Next they were instructed to mount their brooms and Madam Hooch walked round correcting peoples’ grips. Finally when they were all ready, Madam Hooch spoke. “Okay everyone, when I blow my whistle I want you to rise, hover and descend again, got it? Three, two –“

Neville was far too nervous. Before she had even reached one he had shot off the ground like a bullet until he was thirty feet up in the air. Harry saw his white, shaking hands slip off the broom and Neville

fell to the ground and landed face down on the grass with a sickening *crack*.

Madam Hooch hurried over to Neville with an equally pale face. She muttered to herself, ordered everyone to remain on the ground and escorted Neville up to the Hospital Wing. No sooner than she was out of earshot than some of the Slytherins began to laugh.

“Did you see his face?” jeered a pale haired boy, Draco Malfoy. Seeing him around Harry had discovered that Draco Malfoy cared a lot about what type of blood you had.

“Shut it, Malfoy,” Ron snapped. From the first day it had been clear to everyone that Ron and Malfoy were much less than friends.

“Wow you’re brave again, now that you’re away from the lake!” Harry laughed. For days Ron had been avoiding the lake like the plague. Ron muttered something incoherently and seemed to shrink backing away from Harry’s gaze.

The Slytherins and Malfoy continued to laugh and make fun of Neville. One of them noticed something that Neville’s grandmother had sent him at breakfast and they were now passing it round. The minutes crawled passed and the Slytherins continued to shout and laugh.

“Would you lot shut up?” Harry finally growled. “You’re doing my head in!”

“Or what?” Malfoy asked. His two bodyguards cracked their knuckles threateningly.

“Or I’m going to do *you* in.” Malfoy’s unspoken threat was really quite amusing. Not only was he threatening something which he probably wouldn’t carry out, he had *other* people do the threatening for him.

“Oh I’m really scared now, White,” Malfoy laughed. “I’d take you on any time. You can’t defend yourself against squat.”

“How’d you figure that one out?” News of his fight with the Weasley brothers had spread quickly and he was sure Malfoy had heard about it.

“Nice hair.” Oh, so that was it.

“Oh I know isn’t it?” Harry ran a hand through his hair again. “Nice face. When’d the Weasel twits do that for you?”

“At least I have *friends*, White. Even your own housemates can’t bare to be near you.”

“Better to have no friends than scum like you and the rest of the freaks in this place.” Inwardly Harry was very happy about his current living situation. No friends meant no one to get hurt, however unintentionally, by him.

“Know what they’re saying, White? Do you know what they’re saying? They’re saying you used to have a friend and you got him *killed*. That’s right isn’t it? I know by the look on your – ARGH!” Malfoy collapsed to the ground clutching his nose, which was bleeding profusely where Harry had punched him.

Before he turned away, Harry spat at him and said, “You know nothing.”

Harry did not have to suffer the fear of flight any longer as after he hit Malfoy he stalked back up to the school, fuming. How did he know? How did Malfoy know? Harry had been sure no one knew. After all, how could they? They had no idea who Harry was or what he'd done in the past. Unless it was all some very clever ploy of Dumbledore's to trick him into acknowledging he had sent someone to their death so that he, Dumbledore, could find out who Harry was. Then there came another problem... how would Dumbledore know about Mir?

It was all very confusing. There was still the possibility that it was just some crazy rumour and that now, by punching Malfoy, he had just achieved more speculation. Harry almost hit his forehead violently and only restrained himself by thinking, if Malfoy did know, he had no right to flaunt the dead in his face and that he deserved anything Harry threw at him.

He sighed.

News of his delightful flying lesson would reach the ears of Dumbledore or one of the other teachers, no doubt, and Harry would probably get more detentions for it. Even though the detentions themselves weren't that bad, they did grow irksome after a couple and they really did eat up a lot of his free time. How many times was he expected to write "I must not plunge students into the Hogwarts Lake"? If they were going to insist he attend detentions every weeknight (even McGonagall needed some time away from him), couldn't they at least make them a bit more interesting? Harry made a decision then. If he received any more detentions and they did not become more exciting, either he would stop going to them or *he* would break their monotonous cycle.

Sure enough, he was called to Dumbledore's office yet again that night after dinner.

"I don't know what to do with you," Dumbledore sighed. "I have tried deducting points and giving detention for an extended period of time. Both, it appears, have made no impact and you are causing such trouble in but your first year. You are fighting, cheeky to your teachers

and peers alike and Merlin knows what else! I have not seen behaviour like this since..." he trailed off.

"It's not me who's causing all your 'trouble'!" Harry exclaimed. He really was being unfairly punished. If he was to be given detention or whatever else they were going to punish him with now, Harry felt that he ought to have at least deserved it and be given it for something he had actually done. "I'm just the guy who's defending himself! It's strange how Malfoy isn't being punished or the Weasley twits for almost *killing* me or Thomas, Finnigan or Longbottom for putting a snake in my bed and it's strange how I seem to be the bad guy when Weasley challenged me to a fight in the middle of the night when no one would be around to help him when he lost but I suppose that's fine is it? As long as it's not somebody you like it's okay."

"You are one of the most unpopular people this school has seen yet," Dumbledore continued as if Harry hadn't spoken.

"Nice way of avoiding the question," snarled Harry.

"And you have no friends I believe?"

He glared furiously at Dumbledore's forehead. "Do I really look like I want to be friends with any of the scum in this school?" It was like talking to Malfoy all over again.

Dumbledore gave him an intent stare, which went completely unnoticed as Harry was still too busy glaring at his forehead. "I believe you do. Many people show nervousness differently and exhibit different forms of timidity. Some of which are shown by aggression and the need to be the centre of attention."

Laughter erupted from Harry unexpectedly but he could not help it. It was just too hilarious! Dumbledore really would do anything possible to avoid seeing the truth in front of his eyes. With difficulty he sobered up. "You know for a 'genius' you sure are thick. I don't *want* friends, I wish you people would stop trying to *be* friends and I wish you people would just leave me alone!"

"Nevertheless your behaviour here so far has been unacceptable and our means of punishment have not made an impact as of yet."

“Does this mean I don’t have to go to detention?”

“No you still have to attend. A punishment is still a punishment but I was merely suggesting that we will have to look harder for a punishment for you.”

Things were getting a little too confusing for Harry now. Was he actually being punished for breaking Malfoy’s nose or was he there for a lecture?

“Hmm, yes,” mused Dumbledore at last after a few minutes silence. “For your following detentions, as long as they should last, I think we shall have you sort through sort the school punishment files. According to memory, at the end of last year there were one thousand one hundred and eighty-two boxes and each box and a third contain one school years punishments. Where the cards have faded you shall copy them out after which you will place them into alphabetical order in their year groups. You shall also be listing them chronologically. Understand?”

Blinking wearily, Harry replied, “You want me to write out some cards, put them in alphabetical order and list them chronologically.”

“Very good. Now, be off with you!”

As soon as he had left the office Harry addressed Sir. “Sir? What does conohlojicaahly mean?”

The new detentions proved to be longer and duller although it did mean Harry got to read slowly (his reading still wasn’t very good) through all the strange things students got into trouble for and their punishments. The downside was that the boxes dated back to 1803. There were a surprising number of familiar names, which Harry assumed were the pureblood families. There was Nott, Crabbe, Potter, Black, Weasley, Macmillan and many more.

One evening, mid-September, Harry was just leaving a particularly long and boring detention, he was halted in his walk to the Gryffindor tower. Just around the corner he could hear two identical voices talking in hushed whispers.

“Is he near the dormitory?”

“Not that I can see...”

“We have to find him. If he accidentally walks in on us while we’re doing it...”

“I can’t find him on the map!”

“Shhh! Fred! Be quiet! You must have just missed him, let me look.”

“George...” Fred said faintly.

“Shhh! I’m looking!”

“No George... look!” hissed Fred. Harry peeked round the corner to see the two boys pouring over a large piece of old parchment. He hurriedly hid again lest they turn.

“What?”

“Look there! Look! It’s.... Harry Potter!”

“Can’t be! He’s dead!”

“But George... the map never lies.”

“It must be wrong then! There’s no way he can be here.”

“It says he’s just round the corner! Shall we look?”

“It’s not possible! He can’t be here!”

“Let’s look anyway.”

The sound of slow footsteps jolted Harry, who had been transfixed in shock, into life. The ‘how’s’ and ‘why’s’ would have to wait. He knew he had but a few seconds in which to hide but where?

The corridor was long and empty.

There were no portraits, no doors and no suits of armour to hide behind. All that was in the deserted corridor was an open window. Harry's face crumpled as he realised what he had to do. Hurrying over to the window and being very careful not to look down, he slid out into the fresh night air and began to climb.

The bricks on the outside of the castle had been worn away slightly with the weather and age and had been left uneven footholds for Harry to use. Somehow he managed to climb above the window and find a position that he did not believe he would be too likely to fall from. He clung to the castle for dear life.

Footsteps sounded inside the corridor that he had just abandoned. "See Fred no ones here!"

"No one we can see..."

"Look at the map! Harry Potter's disappeared!"

"What? Impossible! You can't disapparate inside Hogwarts..."

"No wait... there's an unlabelled dot – beside us!"

"George, that's a wall."

"No look! Beside the wall!"

"You think he got rid of his name?"

"There's a window here..."

Two identical heads stuck themselves out of the window below Harry. His whole body tensed and he hardly dared to breath. The heads looked first, all around them and then below them.

"Something must be up with the map."

"Or maybe someone's tampering with it..."

"You don't think-"

“Yes I do! Who else George? It would sure explain some of the weird stuff that’s been happening lately.”

In unison they whispered, “Harry Potter is at Hogwarts!”

“Come on, let’s go to bed.”

“Yeah... we can get White some other time.”

The footsteps receded and Harry breathed a sigh of relief. In order for him to climb back through the window, he had to look down to find a suitable foothold. The six-story drop made him whimper slightly and shaking very badly he made his way towards the window, thanking the heavens that nobody ever looked up.

The next day Harry awoke with a plan fully formed in his mind as if he had come up with it in his sleep. The map or whatever it was that the Weasley twins were using could not be left in their possession. It had nearly betrayed him the night before and now the twins were more suspicious than ever.

Luckily, Harry was an expert thief. He had been well trained by – no! Harry berated himself. Thinking about Mir was too painful. All he needed to do was wait for a time when the map would be in their dorm and they would not be able to stop him taking it. By the looks of things, the Weasley twins took the map with them everywhere so that left only one time when it would be possible to take it without their notice: at night.

As Harry lay awake on the far too soft bed, he noticed how it seemed to take even longer than it usually did for the four boys to fall asleep. By the time he deemed it safe to slide out of bed it was well past nightfall. The whole tower was silent save the breathing and snores of its occupants. Carefully he walked out of the dormitory.

The stairs were pitch black and it was difficult to see. Harry wasn’t sure which room was the twin’s dorm so he was forced to open doors a crack to peer inside at its inhabitants. As luck would have it, the correct room was at the top of the tower, the last room he had to check.

Deep breathing sounded all around him and he made sure his breathing was no different than that of theirs. Crouching low, he slowly made his way towards two beds at the far end in which two identical red heads were sleeping upside down.

At the first of the two beds Harry opened the battered trunk, wincing as a loud creak was omitted. He paused and the whole room seemed to have stopped it's breathing. As one they all continued. Cautiously, very cautiously, he began to search for anything that resembled a map.

"There! That's it!"

"What?" Harry hissed quietly. "That's just a bit of parchment."

"Are they wizards or not? It's concealed you fool," Sir sounded especially gleeful as he pointed out Harry's mistakes.

"Fine." He took the parchment, closed the trunk carefully and made his way towards the door. The way was undisturbed and Harry made it back to his dormitory without the slightest hitch. Tucking the map into his pyjamas as he went, he lay down on the floor and went to sleep.

After but a few hours, Harry awoke. He dressed silently and went down through the common room and out into the corridor. Walking quickly he found a broom closet in which he could hide from prying eyes and ears.

"Right, Sir, any ideas how to read this thing?" he said after locking the door and turning on the singular light.

"Figure it out yourself, you stupid boy."

"In other words ye don' know. How can ye be sure this is the map?"

"Some of us can tell when a magical object is present."

Harry sighed and tapped on the parchment with his wand. Nothing happened. "Show me the map." It remained blank. "Revealo? Nah

didn't think that would wo-" Writing had suddenly appeared on the parchment as if by an invisible hand.

'Mr Padfoot would like to know who it is that is attempting to read our map.'

For the briefest of moments he was going to say "Jeremy Hart" but thought better of it. The map certainly wasn't going to tell anyone was it? After all it surely knew; it had known who he was the previous night. "Harry Potter," he said.

'Mr Prongs would like to inquire as to Mr Potter's heritage.'

'Mr Moony would like Mr Potter to ignore Mr Prongs' question and inquires about Mr Potter's coming into possession of this map.'

"Mr Potter would like to know what the hell you're on about."

'Mr Wormtail congratulates Mr Potter on finding the map and should like to know the purposes he intends to use it for.'

"Erm...."

'Do you solemnly swear that you are up to no good?'

"I solemnly swear that I am up to no good," Harry repeated faithfully. Where his wand had been touching the parchment still, unnoticed by Harry, thin lines had begun to spread from it much like a spiders web. The lines criss-crossed and joined and soon the whole parchment was filled in a very detailed map of Hogwarts. There were little dots positioned all over the map, some stationary, some moving, each labelled with a name. Many corridors and passageways Harry had never heard of nor visited were drawn all over the map, some of which even led right out of the castle. Across the top of the magnificent map, was written,

*'Messrs Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs
Purveyors of Aids to Magical Mischief-Makers
Are proud to present
THE MARAUDER'S MAP'*

“How’d I clear it?” he asked after a moment of awing at the map.

More thin green writing appeared in a corner. *‘Is your mischief managed?’*

“Erm, yeah, my mischief’s managed.” Immediately the map was wiped blank and returned to the look of a very old piece of paper. He activated it again and inspected it more closely.

A Dumbledore labelled dot was pacing the room titled ‘Headmasters Office’. What was Dumbledore doing up? Snape was currently walking the corridor the floor below, Peeves was bouncing around the Astronomy Tower and the rest of the population of Hogwarts were unmoving save Argus Filch the caretaker and a few ghosts.

Harry sat in the broom cupboard or a long time simply thinking. It was time to begin extracting revenge on Fred and George for attempting to kill him. There had been plenty of opportunities for them to redeem themselves but they had done no such thing. The Weasley twins, like most of the school, ignored Harry whenever they saw him or sent him glares or petty insults. Smirking to himself, he looked for the school kitchens on the map.

Harry watched Fred and George heartily tucking into their morning meal. As one they raised their goblets and drank deeply, their eyes never leaving each other. Harry smirked. It wouldn't be long now. One of the two said something quietly to the other and started to guffaw loudly. The other twin did not laugh but frowned.

"That's not funny!" he said, outraged. "That sounds like something a Slytherin would do!"

"No it's not!" objected the other, his laughter dying away. "There's nothing wrong with it."

"Yes there is! How would you like it if it were done to you?"

"I wouldn't care."

"Oh sure you say that now but what about when it happens?"

"I still wouldn't care!" Their voices were getting louder and louder and with each new level of loudness they were becoming more aggressive.

"Care to demonstrate?" George said menacingly.

"You wouldn't."

"I wouldn't bet on it."

"Go on then! I *dare* you!"

BANG! Somehow Fred was found at the other end of the hall with a pair of wings and a halo and wearing a white tutu. When he spoke next it all came out in a floating song though the meaning behind the words was clear. "You evil git! I can't believe you just did that!" The hall tittered.

BOOM! George was thrown backwards off the bench and into the Hufflepuff table. He was no longer wearing his black school robe.

Instead, he was wearing a violent shade of pink with pink hair and a glittered face to match. Nor was he standing on the ground; he was floating several feet in the air.

“You dirty Slytherin! I’m your brother!”

CRACK! An ostrich’s head replaced Fred’s own.

KABOOM! George had large, fluffy, yellow wings.

SNAP! Fred was now the owner of a large scaly tail.

CRACKLE! POP! WHIZZ! BAM! FIZZ! DING! PING! And on and on it went. Finally, when it seemed they had been fighting an age, Dumbledore drew his own wand and both boys were disarmed instantly.

The whole hall was in fits of laughter at the two boys even though it had been a very serious fight from their point. There was a cause to laugh; both boys’ appearance had changed drastically to the point that neither was recognisable.

Where Fred had been standing there was a very strange sight. The ostrich’s head was wearing shocking blue eye shadow, red blush and pink lipstick. The lion’s body that was attached to it was wearing a white tutu with green fuzz protruding everywhere. A large yellow, green polka dotted tail trailed for six feet after it. Its arms were long and thin brown sticks ended with lollypop hands and the legs were short, stout and concealed almost completely by a mass of purple hair. The halo, wings and singing voice remained from the first spell fired. Indeed it was a very strange sight.

George was no better, if not worse. His head, at least, looked relatively human. It was true his eyes were no longer large ovals but narrow slits like an animal unaccustomed to looking in daylight and it was true his nose was now so large and hooked that his head tilted forwards with its weight. The violent pink hair remained though it had grown somewhat longer and was sticking up so much it looked like it had been in an explosion. His torso was normal apart from the pink robes he wore but his legs were now identical to the bottom half of a slug. Well, they would have been had they not been flashing every

colour in the rainbow. His arms were still large fluffy yellow wings but it was infested with wriggling creatures greatly resembling worms. His appearance would not have been quite as bad if he were not suspended a metre in the air, upside down.

“What is the meaning of this?” Dumbledore asked, his eyes glinting furiously. It was hard to tell what he was angry about but then Harry saw his mask fall slightly and the cheerful twinkle slip through.

“It was all –“ George began but then he too burst into song like Fred when he had attempted to speak. “I’m a little tea pot short and stout!” The hall filled with laughter again. “His fault, Sir! He was telling me – here’s my handle here’s my spout!”

Dumbledore chuckled slightly as well. “Very well then, Mistrs Weasley and Weasley! Off to the hospital wing! The rest of you, I believe the bell shall be ringing shortly and it would be best if you were headed to class.”

There was a great rush as everyone tried to hurry to their first class at the same time but Harry, being the wise person that he was, took his time whilst making his journey to his class, potions. Arriving well after the bell had rung, he was immediately confronted by Snape.

“White! What pathetic excuse do you have for being late this time?” he barked.

“The same one Malfoy has,” was the cool reply out of Harry’s mouth. Malfoy had entered directly behind Harry having been in the Great Hall himself when the Weasley twins put on their amazing spectacle. It came as no surprise that Snape had instantly singled him out; every time they met he was always searching for a reason to punish him as if one day Harry would crack and confess that he was actually the Boy-Who-Lived.

“Malfoy, why are you late?” Snape asked in a much less menacing tone, which could almost be called bored.

“I was speaking to Professor Flitwick,” drawled Malfoy as he unpacked his potions ingredients.

"I find it hard to believe you were *both* speaking to Professor Flitwick, White. Ten points from Gryffindor! Take your seat!"

The lesson passed in the same monotony in which most of Harry's lessons passed. At least it did until his and Longbottom's, who was still being forced to partner with Harry, potion exploded spraying all the nearby pupils with a green foul smelling concoction. Simultaneously those pupils began to dance about in agony as large boils sprung up where the potion had made contact. Miraculously Harry was only splattered a little on his right arm, which he didn't notice, his wooden arm still untouched.

It was because of this that Snape rounded on him instead of Longbottom who was clutching his face in agony. "White! Can't you read?" growled the teacher. Harry remained silent, unsure whether it was a trick question or not. Snape knew that he couldn't read very well. "Look at the third line! What does it say?"

He squinted through the steam, which was spiralling up in curls from the individual cauldrons. Haltingly and stuttering he managed to decipher the words on the blackboard and he was fairly certain he was pronouncing them correctly for once.

"Stir – three – times – counter – clockwise. Once – the – potion – has – turned – into – a – light – hah – zell – add – the – in – fuss – ee – on – of – wormwood!" he ended triumphantly.

"You brainless boy! I don't know why I try to teach such a boy who is obviously lacking in memory and intelligence! Was it not only yesterday I reminded you that it was infusion?"

Dread filled Harry's body as he realised his mistake. It was true he had trouble with some words but could Sir really think he would be able to learn them *all*? Was it his fault Dumbledore had murdered his aunt? Was it his fault that the need for revenge being the only reason he was even at the school drove all thought of learning words out of his mind?

"Hah-zell, in-fuss-ee-on?" mocked Snape to loud guffaws of the Slytherins who were untouched by the fatal potion. "Do you think I am

stupid boy? You would do well to learn respect! Thirty points to Slytherin!"

"You forgot the other houses," said Harry flatly.

"And a weeks detention! Those who have been affected by the potion hospital wing! You are dismissed!"

There was a mad rush for the door as students climbed over desks, chairs and each other in their haste to the door. Harry threw his remaining potions ingredients into his bag and was presenting his potion to Snape as he'd been instructed when he realised he was the last to leave.

"I suppose you think that was funny Potter?" spat Snape.

"Tsk-tsk!" smirked Harry, placing the vial down on the desk. "Are we forgetting that my name is Mr White? I would watch my step if I were you Snape. You don't want grudges from the past to reflect upon your teaching do you?"

It really was quite an enjoyable sight to watch fury slowly fill the teachers face and see him obviously trying to contain his anger. "One day, *White*, one day the world shall know whom you are and that I was the one to uncover you. Of course it is complete cowardice isn't it though? You are ashamed to admit that you fell for a Deatheater's trick; why else would you hide?"

Harry took his turn and his face was the one to contort in rage. "Perhaps it is so that no one shall know what I am doing." Leaving Snape to ponder this in confusion he turned on heel and stormed out of the classroom, only noticing the tear in his sleeve after he was well away from it.

Swearing in what was coarse language for most but was soon becoming mild for himself, he hurried back into the broom cupboard he had been hiding in earlier that morning. The gleaming, brown wooden arm was easily visible through the large tear and it would do no good to be discovered for who he really was so soon. He wracked his brain for the spell to fix things; he was sure he had learnt it! What was it? Repair, repair, repair, repair was definitely in it somewhere!

"You are the most idiotic boy I have ever met in my entire life and I have seen a lot of fools. It's reparo. I don't know why I bother teaching you!"

"You said that earlier," Harry butted in though he knew Sir wasn't finished. He mended his robes and sat down wearily on an upturned bucket.

"Did I ask you to speak? The potions master is right! You would do better to learn some respect! If nothing else I take it upon myself to teach you that."

"Snape's a git. He don't know what he's talkin' about. He just wants the credit for findin' the world's precious Boy-Who-Lived."

ZAP! A bolt of electricity jolted throughout his body stinging every muscle as it passed.

"Ow! What was that fer?"

"Do you even listen to me whilst I speak? Am I here for nothing? No! I am here to help you extract revenge on that conniving headmaster but it seems I am unappreciated! Do you think I exist solely to do your every bidding? If you are going to go around slacking and pulling pranks then I shall teach you no more! I have no use for a pupil who disobeys or a pupil who risks discovery by mouthing off."

"You're just teaching me first year spells though... I'd learn them here anyway. Why should you stay? What reason do you teach me? I've asked you before, what do you gain from this? You're a flipping random voice in the air that follows me around, do you really expect me to trust you?"

ZAP! The stinging sensation lasted longer this time.

"I know more than simple spells like the ones they teach at this rock of a school! You presume that I shall teach you naught but them? Of course not! You must learn the basics first or you shall fall quickly to your doom. As to your other impudent questions, as I have answered before, you shall know when I see fit! Perhaps I shall leave. I can tell when I am unwanted."

“Oh! But Sir!” Harry was a lot more eager to please now that he knew he was progressing somewhere past the simple spells. “It’s not like that! I do want you teachin’ me! I swear! I’ll behave! Honestly! I’ll be good an’ everything!”

Silence met his words.

It was almost as if a bullet had struck him on the head. Harry couldn’t believe it. Sir hadn’t actually left him had he? The one person who had known the truth about him, understood him? Sir, who had felt the same anger at Dumbledore for whatever reason and shared his hatred and need for revenge, he hadn’t abandoned him in a school full of mindless followers, had he?

“Sir?” he called out tentatively. “Sir please! I can’t get him without you! I need your help to do it!” Words such as these were foreign to him now and sounded strange. He hadn’t used words like please since his aunt died and they were difficult to speak.

“I give you one chance. You shall follow my instructions without question understood? If not, you shall be punished.”

Harry’s relief was so great he agreed instantly. It puzzled him slightly why he had been so worried about Sir leaving. Hadn’t it been his intention to enter Hogwarts with no correspondents or companions so that no more would be hurt because of his stupidity? He didn’t even trust Sir properly, yet he was agreeing to follow his orders without question. For all he knew Sir could be part of an elaborate plot to assassinate him. These thoughts surfaced in Harry’s mind but he couldn’t really believe them possible.

Sighing, Harry picked himself up off of the bucket and left the broom cupboard to go to his next class.

Days past slowly and miserably for Harry. To his dismay Sir made him pay attention in class, be civil to his teachers and not mouth off or disobey in the slightest and it was starting to take its toll on him. Unused to so much work or effort Harry felt very strained after only a few days but at least Sir continued to teach him. He had no idea why he was so desperate to have Sir teach him. Perhaps it was the thought of being completely alone at Hogwarts with no one knowing his secret at all or could it be he was afraid that Sir would tell someone? Maybe he just liked someone to talk to or maybe he needed all the help in getting revenge on Dumbledore that he could get. Who knew how long it would take him to learn so many spells on his own? Whatever the reason Harry was grateful Sir was with him and so continued doing his bidding no matter how exhausted he felt.

Little though he saw the Weasley twins, Harry knew they were conspiring against him still. They had made only one attempt that he knew of to bring their revenge upon him when they had determined that he must have been behind their prank duel. Their story had been all the school could talk about for days. The two Weasleys insisted they had no idea why they had become so aggressive towards each other, like they had been under the influence of something. Only Harry knew that this was true. He had asked the elves he saw in the school kitchens to add a potion, which would make each of them doubt the first person they laid eyes upon. Fred and George's attempt to take their revenge had gone miserably. It was one afternoon after Transfiguration that his class had taken more time than usual to pack up so that he was first to leave the room but just as he reached the door, he had remembered his unhand in homework and doubled back causing Ron, who had been standing just behind him, to have no choice but to leave the room first. Ron had then had all his clothes disappear but had a large black dot on his front that covered his most embarrassing parts.

Any time he was not slaving away in classes, Harry was pouring over books in the one place he knew he wouldn't be at the end of scathing stares, the library. Sir had him research the most ridiculous things: giant wars, the uses of dragon blood and the downfall of Grindelwald

being just a few of the pointless topics. He found a room to practise spells in; a small indiscreet hidden one that he would not have even heard of had he not been scanning the Marauders Map looking for just such a room.

Weeks were flying by now and before Harry knew it, it was the end of October and he had not received any more detentions. That meant there was a week or two more for him to serve of the tedious evenings before he would be free of them completely. It had surprised him considerably when he found his own fathers name along with some of his friends in the punishment files. It was certainly more than once that Sirius Black and James Potter cropped up, more like every third card once he got to the right time period. Harry had learnt lots of spells, most of the first year ones now that he came to think about it. He hadn't forgotten Jacques' request and decided that it was time to have an attempt at getting the Philosopher's Stone. After getting hold of a wooden flute, somehow, to subdue the dog with Harry chose to try to get the stone on Halloween so that all the pupils and teachers would be occupied at the feast.

Long at last, the common room was empty and all the students had gone down the Halloween feast but him. He slid the marauders map out from under him (he had been sitting on it in case one of the Weasley twins recognised it inactivated), activated it and left the common room once he was sure there was no one around. He crept down to the second floor in hopes that some way to the third floor would be revealed. The trouble with the staircases was that they continuously changed course at random times throughout the day, sometimes while you were on them. Luck was against him, however, and a staircase moved just as he reached it to block his way. Harry sighed and started along a corridor on the second floor to look for another staircase. He passed many closed doors – no doubt they had been locked to stop any wandering student searching them whilst the teachers were busy – and thought no more about them. What use did he have for classrooms at this time? No point in wasting time. A great rumble echoed below him as the noise from the Great Hall suddenly rose ten fold, vanished and rose again. The feast wasn't over already was it? Not so much as stopping to consider it, he hurried on faster than ever. A horrible smell filled his nostrils and up ahead he saw a mutant beast stamping into the girls bathroom. Could that be what all

the noise was about downstairs? He shrugged and continued on; it wasn't his problem.

"EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEK!" A girl's scream sounded all about Harry who froze for a moment then started walking again. No! He wouldn't waste time being the hero. There was a job to be done and who knew how long it would be before he got another chance? The girl screamed again and Harry stopped in his tracks again. Try as he might, he could not leave the girl to lose her life because he was too busy hunting for a stone.

Deeply regretting what he was doing, he turned back towards the bathroom. Upon entering Harry gasped at the sight before him. Several stalls were in ruin along with a couple of sinks, Hermione was crouched, tears streaming down her face, in a corner and, worst of all, the most hideous creature Harry had ever seen was advancing on her. It was twelve feet tall and had dull, grey coloured granite skin. Its body, grey and lumpy, the size of a boulder, was sitting on top of two short legs that were as thick as tree trunks with flat, horny feet. The most repulsive smell ever rolled off it in waves and it was holding a large wooden club, which was held in the air about to strike.

No thinking was needed; Harry knew what he had to do. "Expelliarmus!" he cried. It was a simple spell that he had learnt from his defence book but nevertheless it was effective and the troll's club zoomed out of its hand and hit the wall behind Harry.

In confusion the troll looked stupidly at his hands. It seemed to take a few moments for it to realise that its weapon was no longer its own. The troll then stumbled around to look at Harry, who was doing some fast thinking, and started to advance on him.

Relying on his aim not to waver, he cast another spell, the same one he had used on Ron Weasley. It had worked once, so why not again? He grinned in triumph as the troll rose into the air and looked around bewildered. Harry sent it plummeting to the ground where it fell over still not understanding fully what was going on. The troll got to its feet seemingly unharmed and advanced on Harry. This time he pointed his wand not at the troll but at its club, which was still lying dormant behind him. He levitated the club over the troll and then proceeded to

start bashing it with it. The troll forgot Harry completely and started attacking the club, its new target. Again and again the club hit the troll but it was still undeterred until eventually Harry directed the club to fall quickly from the ceiling upon the trolls head. Swaying greatly, the troll stumbled towards him whilst he tried to scramble backwards out of harms way. He stumbled slightly and fell to the ground but continued to crawl backwards but the troll fell at last with an almighty roar and landing with a sickening crunch on Harry's leg.

Grinding his teeth, Harry managed to only omit a small cry at the pain. Somewhere Hermione was still sobbing though she had not been harmed. He tried to shift his position so that he could be free of the monstrosity that was currently trapping him but he failed miserably and could do nothing but sit. Footsteps sounded somewhere along the corridor, lots of them. Soon enough the door to the bathroom burst open and revealed several haggard teachers. McGonagall was the first to enter, her lips thinner than Harry had ever seen them, closely followed by Snape who narrowed his eyes the moment he saw Harry, then Quirrell, shaking like a leaf, and finally Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling that annoying twinkle.

"Going tae –" Harry began when no one did or said anything. ZAP! Sir reminded him that he was being impolite. "Could you *please* move this thing off my leg?"

"Oh! Sorry, Mister White!" McGonagall jumped into action and began to levitate the troll off of him very slowly but it was too much for Harry. He gave a cry of pain though he tried to refrain himself; it was worse than the troll on him. McGonagall set the troll back on his leg after it had only risen slightly from him.

"Severus could you fetch a pain relieving potion for Mister White?" Dumbledore turned to Snape who consented and left the bathroom.

"What on earth did you think you were doing?" Professor McGonagall said with a cold fury in her voice at Harry. He peered over the troll at Hermione.

"H-he – hic! – H-h-heard me s-s-scream – hic! P-professor," stuttered Hermione through her sobs.

“And what,” McGonagall said with the same furious voice she had used with him. “Were you doing when you should have been in your common room?”

“R-Ron Weasley had – hic! – s-said something t-that u-upset m-m-me. If Jeremy h-hadn’t b-b-been passing – hic! – I-I would have b-b-been killed.”

“But what were you doing outside the common room, Jeremy?” Dumbledore asked as calm as if they had been discussing what type of tea they liked best.

He bit his lip. “I was looking for her?” he said with more than a bit of hopefulness. It was blatant that he was lying. Before anyone could say another word, Snape returned with the potion and bent down to administer it at Dumbledore’s signal. Harry drank it without question. A sensation that he was becoming quite familiar with came over him again: one of not breathing. He didn’t panic as he had done it the past. If it was the same as before it would pass and he wouldn’t actually suffocate but it was still more than a little discomforting.

The first worrying thing was when the feeling did not pass quickly and he began to see dots buzzing in front of him. The second was when the whole of his body felt like it was on fire, like when the Weasleys had tried to do something to him. If he could have breathed, he would have been screaming. If he could have breathed, he would not have passed out.

When he came to, there was no pain in Harry’s leg nor was there a troll upon it. He opened his eyes and scrambled backwards against the wall at the sight he saw. Four blurry heads had been staring down at him.

“Your glasses are in your pocket. Do not ask any questions.”

Obediently Harry returned his glasses to his face. But why did he need glasses? Since he had taken the potion to change his appearance his sight had been perfect. Unless...

The four teachers faces were as white as snow. Not one said a word. Snape looked less white but it was hard to tell with his sallow skin. Now that Harry thought about it, he looked slightly triumphant.

“So...” he said nervously. “How’re y’all doing?”

“You’re-“ Hermione gasped from his right. “You’re – you’re – Harry Potter!”

The game was over. It was truth time.

Or was it? He thought Sir might understand if he was a little less than polite. After all, was he likely to be spoken to politely? There was no way he’d surrender to Dumbledore without a fight. If he could get away, he would.

It took Harry but a second to assess the situation. The four teachers were shocked and stunned and most likely wouldn’t react too quickly. Hermione was standing in the corner and wouldn’t be much of a threat either. Unfortunately Dumbledore, Quirrell, Snape and McGonagall were blocking the most direct path to the door but with a quick dart around them he would be able to escape. Assuming that they weren’t quick to react.

Before anyone could say or do anything, Harry had made a mad dash for the door. Long before he reached it he was frozen from waist down the floor and was unable to do anything but look at the disbelieving faces of the teachers before him.

No one spoke.

The silence stretched long and thin until he could stand their stares no longer. “Well this is a uncomfortable position fae me init?” No longer having to keep up the pretence of Jeremy Hart, he reverted to the more comfortable slurred speech he had picked up whilst living on the streets of London.

“Well, well, well,” smirked Snape smugly. “Look who’s finally decided to show their true colours.”

“Bugger off, Batty,” retorted Harry. No longer was there a need to hide his loathing of Snape, not that he had really tried before.

“Just you wait till I-“

“Till ye what, Snivellus? Throw me in detention? I ‘ardly think it matters much now.”

“Harry,” breathed Dumbledore, finally making a sound which was more than could be said for the other two teachers and Hermione, who was now settling for gazing at him in horror, no doubt for speaking back to a teacher.

“Oooo,” said Harry overjoyed, staring at Dumbledore’s nose. “Tell me ye’re ‘avin’ an ‘eart attack?” Snape gave him a withering look.

“Harry,” breathed Dumbledore again. “Is it really you?”

“Nah s’the tooth fairy.” Some people acted completely ridiculously sometimes.

“But Harry,” Dumbledore said with a little more strength. “Where have you been?”

“Funny how ye ask that first. Not ‘Hey Harry how ye doin’?’ but ‘Where were ye?’. A can tell ye really missed meh.” Harry didn’t really care, of course. He would much rather Dumbledore not say anything at all and leave him in peace but Harry was playing for time.

There was no escape. There was no magic potion to hide him this time or a friend hiding in the shadows to leap out to defend him. His friends were all either dead or in danger because of him. He always messed up people’s lives. Dumbledore had finally caught him this time; Harry knew that. Well if he was going down, he wouldn’t go quietly.

“So Dumbledore, sent anyone tae their death lately?”

Eyebrows rose all round and the rest of the bathrooms occupants (recovering from their shock slightly) stared confusedly between the two of them.

"I have never sent anyone intentionally to their death, Harry."

"Except the odd person so you can get what ye want. Doesn' matter 'ow many people die so long as ye get what ye want."

"Harry, you're aunt was not herself!"

"We've been through this before." *Still* Dumbledore insisted that his aunt was an impostor! Did he really think Harry wouldn't know his own aunt? And, of course, Dumbledore would have him believe that it was simply coincidence that nothing Aunt Petunia had said had been disproven.

"Perhaps it would be best, headmaster," interjected Snape. "If we were to continue this in your office?"

"Yes, yes," agreed Dumbledore somewhat distractedly. They all turned to go but Harry quickly stopped them.

"Okay one, who says I want to go to your bloomin' office? Two, a'm kinda cemented down 'ere and three, I don't want *her* (he indicated Hermione) to come."

"Very well Miss Granger, return to Gryffindor Tower," instructed McGonagall.

Hermione started to leave quietly but again, Harry objected. "Don't send her there! She'll tell them bloody Weasels!"

"Very well then. Professor Snape?" Dumbledore said. "Could you please modify Miss Granger's memory?"

"No!" cried Hermione in anguish. "I swear! I won't say a word!"

"Be warned Miss Granger, expulsion will not be far behind if you do not keep your word."

She paled pathetically and scuttled out the room but paused at the door. "Bye Je- Harry!"

He almost hit himself on the head. Now Granger was going to be pestering him all the time. Why couldn't she just stay out the way? If it hadn't been for her he would have gotten the stone by now and would have repaid his debt to Jacques. Well there were two reasons he didn't have many friends on the streets. A lot of them were scared of him because of his natural fighting talents and the others because he wasn't the easiest of people to get along with.

"Are we goin' or no'?"

Dumbledore removed the spell holding him to the ground but no sooner was he free than Snape tied his hands behind his back. Harry opened his mouth to say something abusive but Snape waved his wand again and his voice was silenced.

"No sneaky spells Potter."

And they left the bathroom and journeyed along the many corridors to the headmaster's office where they would, no doubt, have a very long conversation.

After what seemed like an age, the bizarre group arrived at Dumbledore's office and took seats at his indication. Well the teachers present sat. Harry, however, remained standing with his hands bound behind his back and his voice still silenced. To make his reason obvious he spat at Snape. Dumbledore gave a flick of his wand and the ropes fell away, Harry's voice returned, a chair swept forwards knocking Harry onto it and fresh ropes tied him to the chair though they were far looser. Friendly.

"Harry where have you been hiding all these years?" Dumbledore asked, calmer than he had been in the bathroom. Evidently he was over the initial shock of finding Harry hidden under his nose.

Harry sent him a look of utter disdain. "I didn' tell ye las' time ye forced me intae yer ... *school*... an' ah'm not going tae tell ye now. Ye don' seem to realise tha' I were hidin' fer a reason." It was somewhat irksome to have been discovered so early in the school year for who he really was. He hadn't even lasted until Christmas! Though, he couldn't really be blamed for the appearance potion being affected by other potions ingredients.

"And what reason was that, my dear boy? What did we do to deserve this detestation?" Quirrell, McGonagall and Snape seemed content to just listen in.

"Oh a dunno," Harry sneered in casual sarcasm. "It's no' like ye tried tae kill any o' me frien's or tied me up or killed me aunt or lied tae anyone or forced people to do things they didn' wan' to do."

"We have never intended to hurt anyone –"

"No ye didn' but ye didn' care if anyone got hur' because of what you were doin' either. Don' ye know a don' wan' tae fight yer blasted fights!" He glared at the wall behind Dumbledore.

"No one is asking you to," came the patient reply. "All I have ever wanted to do is protect you. There are dangers far worse than anything you have encountered –"

"If they're so dangerous how come they haven' done anything yet? Ye claim yer protecting me but all ye've done is *kill* my aunt! If there are so big dangers out there then 'ow come ah've not seen any of them yet?" There. He must have stumped Dumbledore by now. Harry's aim was simply to keep him talking until he had no more answers and then someone besides him *had* to realise that he wasn't all that great, didn't they? He knew there was no hope to escape this time; he had been lucky the last time. If Harry had to stay in the sorry excuse for a school then he would be sure things went his way.

"I, myself, have never come across a wolf but that is not to say they are not there. Very well, Harry. We shall move on. How did you get to Hogwarts?"

Was that another trick question? "A took the train..."

"And how did you disguise yourself?"

"Why s'it matter? A'm no stayin'."

"You most certainly are." Dumbledore's voice suddenly became fierce. "We can't have a young boy living on his own without a home."

"Ye jus' wan' me where ye can keep an eye on me!" He was running out of ideas. What else could he use against Dumbledore? He just ignored most of the accusations against him. There had to be something that he couldn't ignore but what?

"How did you get your school supplies?" Dumbledore asked before Harry could ponder any longer.

"Don't answer that."

"Why?" Harry would have probably asked this question anyway of Dumbledore but instead it was addressed to Sir.

"If you value your friend's life, don't answer."

"There are some things that are necessary for us to know, Harry. Please answer the question."

He remained silent. There was a rustle from his left and the most wonderful floating feeling came over him. It was as if all of his thoughts of revenge of hate were simply wiped away leaving only a calm happiness.

Suddenly, and for no apparent reason, he heard a firm voice in his head.

"Answer the question," said the new voice.

"Don't listen to it, boy. Stay silent," commanded Sir, equally firmly.

Harry opened his mouth to answer. There was no reason why he shouldn't answer.

"Boy! Close your mouth!" Sir's normal quiet murmuring voice had disappeared. It was a loud rasp now, on the verge of shouting.

He shut his mouth obediently. If he didn't obey Sir, he would be punished.

"Answer the question."

He opened it.

"Don't answer!"

"Answer!"

"Don't answer!"

"Answer!"

"Don't!"

"Answer NOW!"

"DO NOT ANSWER!"

"ARRRRRRGGGGGGHHHHH!" Harry screamed. His head felt like it was going to explode. "GET OUT OF MY HEAD!" He raised his hands to

clutch his ears tightly and shook his head trying to clear it, not noticing that the ropes that had bound him had burst into flame.

The teachers sitting next to him leapt up in alarm when he shouted. Their chairs had burst into flame along with his ropes. Snape was looking very shaken whereas the McGonagall and Quirrell merely looked startled. Dumbledore got up as well and with a short wave of his wand extinguished the fires. As one, the four members of staff turned to look in wonder at the boy who was now trying to tear his ears off.

"Harry?" a worried voice sounded from somewhere in front of him. "Harry? What's wrong?"

The blissful silence had vanished much quicker than it had appeared and the voice receded from his mind. When he felt it was safe, Harry removed his hands from his ears and turned to glare at Snape. "Why don' ye ask *him*?" Now that the strange emptiness had gone from his mind it was very easy to tell that it had been Snape who had invaded the privacy of his mind.

"Severus?" Dumbledore inquired.

"I'm sure I don't know what he's talking about now."

"Oh, so ye normally creep inside peoples heads an' tell 'em tae do stuff?" Harry felt the heat rise up inside him. "This how ye get yer classes to behave? Are ye that bad a teacher? Is it 'cause everyone hates ye?"

"I have done no such thing!"

"He used an unforgivable curse. He could get sentenced to life in jail for it."

Reluctant though Harry was to listen to voices in his head at that moment in time, he used the information. "I could 'ave ye arrested ye know. Illegal init? Wha's tae stop me from calling the coppers on ye right now?"

“If we could get back to the matter at hand?” Dumbledore seemed to have forgotten about securing Harry to the chair again. “We shall announce it to the wizarding world tomorrow that you’ve been found and –“

“Wait jus’ one second!” He had an opportunity on his hands and Harry wasn’t about to pass it up. If he could remain hidden, inconspicuous, he would be able to train with Sir still, undisturbed. He would be able to learn at Hogwarts away from prying eyes. It would be much easier to help Jacques if foolish students weren’t constantly bothering him. And Dumbledore had mentioned enemies. If, by any chance, he did have enemies out there who were a bigger threat to him than he knew then it would be best to remain unknown to them.

“Who says I want tae be found?”

McGonagall, Quirrell and Snape all opened their mouths in astonishment but Dumbledore remained unfazed, almost as if he expected Harry to say that.

“Very well but you are to remain at Hogwarts to learn magic.”

“No more detentions though.” He really was wasting a lot of time in detention at night.

“No more fighting.”

It was like bargaining at a market. “No more people tryin’ to kill me.”

“No more provoking them.”

“No more pickin’ on me.” Harry looked directly at Snape.

“I do not-“

“And no tailin’ me,” he finished hesitantly. Was there anything else he wanted? “And access to the restricted section of the library.”

“Headmaster, I really don’t think he should be allowed,” interrupted McGonagall before Dumbledore could speak.

"No, I agree with you," said Dumbledore after a moments pause.

"Then I'll tell the government abou' Snape's illegal activities," Harry pointed out. He *needed* access in there. Sir had been telling him that for weeks.

"Than I shall tell them who you are," argued Dumbledore.

"Then a'll run away again."

There was a long pause. He crossed his gloved fingers in his pockets. According to Sir there was information that would benefit him greatly. If they didn't agree he would still find a way in there eventually but it would be a lot easier if he could just walk in.

"Fine." Harry smirked. "One more thing though, Harry. Take off the gloves." The grin fell.

"No," he said barely audible. At first it was not clear even to him why he was refusing. One thing that he was always certain of, was that he did not want anyone finding out about his arm, yet. Perhaps it was so he would have a surprise up his sleeve when the time came he would need one or maybe he thought Dumbledore would do something to the arm he had grown to love. The reason he decided on, was that it would lead to awkward questions about Jacques and the whole story might unfold. It would then become common knowledge that he was trying to steal the Philosopher's Stone, the very thing that Dumbledore had taken great care to hide.

"Look at me, Harry," he commanded softly.

So that was his choice? Look into the eyes of his enemy or reveal his most treasured secret? How was it possible to choose? If he looked at Dumbledore then he would probably use some mind reading trick on him and could quite possibly find out about his arm anyway. Or he would find out something worse. What was worse, he didn't know, but Harry wouldn't put it past Dumbledore to find something. But if he showed his arm, his dear wooden arm that he had grown so attached to, how would he use it against him? Either way ended in misfortune for him.

“Look into his eyes!”

Knowing that it would give far too much away if he spoke, Harry settled for a look of confusion that he was sure Sir wouldn't miss. The teachers, who were getting slightly impatient by now, would just think that he was contemplating something.

“He's trying to get in!” Sir sounded breathless and desperate; what was wrong with him? Sir had always been strong, calm and most of all composed. *“I can't hold him off much longer! It will be better for you if you look into his eyes!”*

Well that settled it then. Harry raised his eyes to bore into Dumbledore. He showed him all his hatred for the man who sent his parents to their death, knowingly killed his aunt and imprisoned his godfather for life. He showed him all the sorrow that had become of his life because of that one man. He showed him what had happened to Sting, to Mir and to all others connected to him because of him. Harry showed Dumbledore all the pain he had caused.

Fire burned in his eyes, yet Dumbledore held his gaze still. How could he? How could that man look at all the damage he had caused those he had tried to 'protect' without so much as flinching? Was he that heartless? Harry found himself hating the man even more. The fire spread from his eyes and filled his heart.

But it wasn't a fire solely for revenge any more. It actually burned him now. Without consciously realising it, Harry fell to his knees in pain and clutched at his heart. With a great effort he tore his eyes away.

A hand fell on his shoulder. He glared up at the owner who happened to be Professor McGonagall.

“Are you-“ she began kindly.

“Leave me alone!” he snapped. “A'm fine! A was fine before you lot came! Leave me alone!” He wrenched himself free of her grasp and stormed out the office. Surprisingly no one stood in his way.

It was long past curfew now. Everyone would probably be in bed. The hallways were safe for Harry Potter to walk.

What would he do now? No matter what happened Harry knew he had to stay at Hogwarts. There was no escaping a second time, Dumbledore would make sure of that. He couldn't walk around looking like himself though. Could he charm himself to look like Jeremy Hart White again? No, he had neither the ability nor knowledge. The only way to look like Jeremy was to take the same potion again. Harry took off his glasses and rubbed a smudge from them thoughtfully. Of course! How stupid he was being! He rammed the glasses onto his head and hurried off in the direction of Gryffindor Tower.

How had he forgotten? Nymph, being the unschooled genius Harry now thought of her as, had secured another bottle of the potion for his use in his trunk. She must have scraped every pocket in London to afford it. She probably went hungry for a month. Nymph was a saint. As Harry had suspected, the whole school was sleeping and he entered unnoticed into the common room, luck for once being with him. Similarly unnoticed he reached his shabby trunk and rummaged through the few possessions he owned. Finally he found it: a small vial, red in colour, full of a swirling liquid. Screwing up his eyes he downed the bottle.

Immediately he felt like gagging. The potion was the vilest thing he had ever had to drink, including the strange concoction one of his friends had made him drink for a dare. The effect it had was instantaneous, however. His whole body, thin though it was, felt like it had bugs crawling under its skin. His vision blurred under the influence of his glasses and he was soon inclined to remove them. Jeremy Hart White was once more.

His head was a complete buzz. There was no chance of him making sense of everything that night. It only occurred to him as he was settling down to sleep in his usual position on the floor that he had wasted a very good opportunity to go after the stone.

xXxXxX

Harry woke at his usual four in the morning surprisingly well rested. He had no intention of practising spells, however; he had too much thinking to do. Vacating the dormitory housing his sleeping

roommates, he made for the small room he had deemed his own. Was there yet another supernatural being that caused the fire that had burned within him? No, he didn't think so. Not this time. This time it had been purely himself. His hatred for Dumbledore, his need for revenge. Did the man have *no* conscience? Was he truly heartless? How could someone, who had fought in two wars, not care how many got hurt in his path to victory? The war had ended and he still didn't care! If Dumbledore wanted Harry to join his fight, he was doing very badly. Perhaps he didn't care if Harry was on his side or not as long as he killed the Dark Lord. Thinking carefully about it, he realised that no one had actually told him the name of the Dark Lord yet.

Was that yet another ploy of Dumbledore's? Who knew? The man had so many crazy ideas, it was slightly questionable about his sanity. It was surprising that more people had not thought to question his actions. Perhaps they did. Perhaps they did and they had been silenced.

The members of staff at Hogwarts would no longer bother him. Dumbledore would make sure of it. And Harry's detentions were gone. That certainly freed up a large amount of time. Who cared if students wondered why he had been let off? Dumbledore never cared for the consequences of his actions so why should he? Did he care too much?

Harry sighed and picked up one of the books he had left in the small room. The only way he would be able to do anything in the wizarding world would be if he learnt spells and learn them he would. If the wizarding world was so full of people who would blindly follow someone with such dark intentions then Harry would be the one to set them right. He would have his revenge one day and then the world would see what Dumbledore was really like. The first step was to learn and that was closely followed by repaying his debt to Jacques but still Harry would have his revenge and what sweet revenge it would be.

As usual Harry was one of the first few to breakfast even though he ate the least. It was a good place to be seen reading every morning; you never knew who would try to frame you for what. The students around him all looked very tired. He supposed they had had a late night contemplating what had become of the troll if they hadn't already been told. If Dumbledore was a better man, Harry would have expected him to keep his name out of the whole troll affair but seeing as it was Dumbledore he would probably make a grand announcement about how he had bravely fought the troll single-handed and won. That would cause a few students to raise their eyebrows at him and more rumours would ensue. Everyone would be confused as to why he had helped save Granger when he hated the school. No matter. Harry would simply have to show them all that he was not on Dumbledore's side.

Sure enough, when the hall was fullest of students and the staff table filled Dumbledore stood to make an announcement and the school fell silent at once. "As you are all aware, a troll managed to enter into Hogwarts last night," he began grandly. "And, as some of you may know, it cornered Miss Granger in one of the school lavatories. One of our number gallantly went to her rescue and managed to knock the troll out single-handed and risked his own life doing so. Fifty points shall be awarded to Gryffindor and let us give a round of applause to Mr Jeremy White!"

Nobody made a sound. Instead, every head in the hall turned to look at him in surprise. Harry made a rude hand gesture towards Dumbledore and, swinging his bag over his shoulder as he did so, began to leave the hall. It felt like walking in a swimming pool under their gaze. Every movement felt greatly exaggerated and hard to make.

Finally he was free and headed straight for the library. He needed to research spells that made music. He probably should have done it before he was going to attempt to get the stone but Harry hadn't really seen the point. Now it would have to be taken under the utmost stealth; even though he had told Dumbledore not to have teachers

following him, he was pretty sure he would be under close observance.

He was reading about a very complex charm to create a self-playing harp when he heard a tentative voice behind him. "Excuse me, Jeremy?"

Harry gritted his teeth and looked into the face of the girl he had rescued from the troll. "What?" he snapped. He really wasn't in the mood to put up with her.

"Well – I mean – I just wanted to say –" She flopped down into the chair beside his.

"Say what?" he asked bitterly.

"Thank you," Hermione gushed. "For saving my life. You know we get lessons off today so the teacher's can help rebuild the bathroom."

No classes? Well at least one good thing had come out of saving her dratted life. Now he would have more time to spend researching spells that would help him get to the stone. "Fine. Now leave."

"Can't I stay? I mean, in the library with you?"

"Do I *look* like I want you to stay?" Harry was making a point of blocking her out. He bent further over his book.

"Oh!" she said crest-fallen. "But what have I done? You can't hate me really. I *know* you don't. You wouldn't have saved me otherwise. Please can I stay, Harry?"

"Shut it!" he hissed in alarm and quickly scanned the room for eavesdroppers. "Bugger off won't you? What was I supposed to do? Leave you to die?"

"But what did I do?"

"*You're* the reason I got discovered! If it hadn't been for you Dumbledore would have never known I was here." There really was no getting rid of Hermione.

“But why -?”

“Go *away!* I don’t need filth like you hanging around.”

And finally, looking very downhearted, Hermione left.

Harry’s triumph at finally being left alone did not last long, however, and it was no more than ten minutes later that Ron came in and sat down beside him.

“What do *you* want?” He would have thought Ron would be avoiding him like he had been the day before. There was no reason anything should change now.

“Why’d you save Hermione, eh? Trying to get into Dumbledore’s good books, are we?” he sneered.

“Dumbledore is the last person whose ‘books’ I want to be in. Now kindly leave.”

“Well you don’t fool me, White. I know what your kind are like always-
“

“*My kind?* What the hell is *my kind?*”

Ron raised his eyebrows and wrinkled his nose. “Dirty *Slytherins* who don’t deserve to be here. Always thinking you’re better than everyone else. You worm your way into high places then go about killing us wizards just because we aren’t *pureblood.*”

“Is there a point to this?”

“Stay away from Hermione. Stay away from us all. We don’t want dirt like you in our house.” Ron too, left.

“I thought you were better than that.” It was the great Draco Malfoy, king of the snubbers. “Then you went and helped a mudblood.”

The staring and whispers from the random students hiding behind shelves was one thing but was it really worth the constant interruptions just to use the library? “What is it *now?*”

“Tut tut, White! I would be more careful if I were you. You weren’t at the feast last night and you never know who might let it *slip* to the teachers. You may have helped their mudblood but I’m sure they would be *very* interested to know that you were up to something last night.”

“Are you *done*? You people are really quite annoying.” Honestly, save one persons life and suddenly everyone wanted to be your friend.

“I’m telling you, White, you can’t have the world as your enemies. You need allies somewhere. Even *you* can’t live if the whole world’s out for your blood. I can help you there.”

“And why should I trust *you*?” What was Malfoy getting at? It had only been the other day that he had laughed about his lack of friends to his fellow Slytherins. He had to be up to something, but what?

Malfoy bent over the table towards Harry and said one last thing before he left. “Well for starters, we both hate Dumbledore. Think about my offer, White. You never know when it’ll come in handy.”

There was definitely something up with Malfoy. He didn’t exactly seem the Good Samaritan type and he was never anything but insulting to anyone but the Slytherins. His sudden interest in being more sociable towards Harry was very peculiar and was definitely something to cause suspicion.

Before anyone else could bother him about what he had been doing the night before, Harry picked up his books and left for the private room he normally studied in. He spent the rest of the day working in solitude attempting to master a spell that would conjure a song to sound in the air for a lengthy amount of time. The best he got however was a long note like a foghorn, which was probably the sound he would have managed to make out of the flute.

“Did you hear? He once killed a vampire.”

“I heard he used the Dark Arts to save that girl.”

“You know, he’s got Hermione in a life debt to him now and he’s using that to make her do perform some dark magic.”

Harry was the subject of much talk for the next few days to come and most of the tales that were spun about him were so ridiculous it was amazing that they were being spread around the school. Things ranged from him being a ministry worker in disguise, hunting for dark wizards, to being possessed by the Dark Lord. He even heard one ridiculous story about how he wasn't even real and he was an apparition of Dumbledore's made to protect the school.

It was the crowds of students milling around him in the hallways that made him late for Potions the next day and he entered a few minutes late directly behind Ron. The rest of the class was already seated by this point and Snape had begun his daily lecture before they began their potions. Naturally Snape did not take kindly to his talk being interrupted.

"White! Weasley!" he barked no sooner than they had placed a foot in the room. "Explain yourselves!"

"I had to speak to a prefect, Sir," said Ron meekly.

"That's no excuse! Kindly arrange your private matters to outside of class time!" Amazingly Snape managed to find faults in even the most legitimate of excuses. "Ten points from Gryffindor and detention with me tonight! White, why are you late?"

"I didn't want to see your face for any longer than I had to," Harry drawled. "I might have gone blind."

"Five points from Gryffindor! Seat!"

Not without reason, Ron and several others found his punishment, or lack of, very unfair. This caused another wave of rumours to fly through the school almost as quickly as the time began to fly past. It all went in a blur of colours, small arguments with teachers and spells soaring in all directions. Before it even seemed possible it was the beginning of December.

The weather was very cold now and frost lay over the ground nearly every day. Students were required to bundle up in thick woollen cloaks in order to leave the castle and getting to Herbology was a nightmare. The ground was hard and the grass clutched at their shoes leaving them to stumble over the clusters of frozen mud.

So far there had been two games of 'Quidditch' and all but Harry and a few teachers had attended the matches. He didn't really understand the rules nor did he care but Harry knew that it was played on broomsticks and was undoubtedly the most popular sport in the wizarding world. All four houses had their own teams made up of seven players and usually half the school supporting them. Only two teams could play against each other at a time so the houses that weren't playing would side with one of the two. Everyone who went were in exceptionally excited moods both before and after the match, so much that Harry decided to attend the Ravenclaw versus Slytherin match.

The Saturday of the match dawned particularly cold, just to spite Harry. The one day he would be going outside for an extended period of time just happened to be the coldest yet. The rest of the school didn't seem to mind; in fact, the pupils directly related to the Quidditch teams seemed perfectly happy with it, something about a "good kick-off".

Nevertheless Harry found himself out in the stands of the enormous pitch the size of a football stadium awaiting the game to begin like the rest of his peers. Hundreds of seats rose all around the pitch, high enough so they could see quite easily, and three tall golden hoops stood grandly at each end of the pitch. The grass was neatly cropped though it really served no purpose as the players would be flying but it was short and prim with white lines drawn every now and then, which held no significance to Harry, but he was sure it meant something to everyone else.

Once everyone was *comfortably* seated on the hard wooden benches, two teams marched proudly onto the field. A friend of the Weasley

twins, Lee Jordan, was the commentator with much modification of Professor McGonagall. With his help, Harry was able to understand most of what was going on from the moment the two captains shook hands.

The Slytherins had possession of the 'Quaffle' for the majority of the game and it was with this they scored through the hoops. Their two 'Beaters' were particularly vicious and hit the 'Bludger' with almighty strength and gave the Ravenclaw team many minor injuries. There was a member of each team who had done nothing but circle high above so far and Harry had no clue what it was they were supposed to be doing.

The game wore on and it was becoming very unclear why everyone seemed to enjoy watching the game so much. It was quite dull, watching the Slytherin team throw a ball through a hoop more than the Ravenclaws. Was he supposed to be excited about *this*? Harry found himself wondering frequently.

Suddenly the crowd's attention was drawn with much anticipation towards the two players, which Harry later found out were called Seekers, who had done nothing yet. The two of them were racing neck in neck after a small golden ball flying with extreme speed. The chase took them over the whole of the pitch and eventually the Snitch flew right over Harry's head. One of the Slytherin Beaters (he forgot his name) pelted the Bludger at the Ravenclaw Seeker who managed to dodge just in time but was forced to pull out of the race. The Bludger did no such thing however, and continued to speed towards the stand, almost as if it were aiming for someone there instead of the players on brooms.

Harry's eyes widened in alarm as the black ball soared directly towards his seat. "What the -?" BANG! The Bludger crashed into the bench where he had been sitting the moment before he leapt aside. That was one confused ball. It ricocheted off the bench and whizzed through the air after a broomstick. The Gryffindors surrounding Harry tittered at his misfortune and he raised his eyebrows at the large dent that had been his seat. Waving his wand and muttering an incantation he soon mended the seat and turned to watch the game finding it slightly less dull now.

Apparently the Snitch was unusually quick because the Ravenclaw Seeker soon rejoined the other in the chase. They pursued the ball a little while longer and Harry lost interest again. The Bludgers were very interesting. Seemingly at random they would attempt to knock a player off their broom unless a Beater would strike it with their wooden bats in which case it would purposefully attempt to knock a player off their broom.

CRACK! Harry gasped as the bone in his arm broke in two and the culprit bludger bounced off and tried to rebound. "For –" he exclaimed as he ran blindly past snickering peers trying to ignore the pain in his back as the Bludger hit that too. He ducked as it swirled around to hit him again. The two Seekers were flying low over the stands now still in pursuit of the Snitch. Glancing worriedly at the Bludger that was preparing to attack again, Harry thought carefully. Which was worse, heights or the ball of doom?

"You can thank me later," Sir murmured surprisingly still audible over the shouting crowd. The pain lifted from Harry's arm and he was immensely grateful as this meant he would have fewer obstacles.

At the precise moment the Ravenclaw Seeker flew over the stand he was currently occupying, Harry leapt up and took hold of her broom. She screamed and tried to kick his hand that was holding the broom. Swinging himself he managed to grab hold of it with his other and then managed to throw the girl off into the lap of a young boy. Amazingly he managed to get himself seated properly, instead of dangling off the broomstick. What was even stranger though, was that it didn't feel strange. Harry didn't think of the immense height at which he was flying and he felt completely at ease on the broomstick despite the fact that he had never flown before in his life.

Harry shot upwards like a bullet to evade the Bludger and but his lip as he realised what he had to do. At around one hundred feet in the air Harry turned the broom suddenly to face the ground below, letting the Bludger overshoot him. The Bludger circled round to attack him again and Harry let the broom fall into a vertical dive. He pushed it harder as it plummeted to the ever-closer earth and was only dimly aware of the screams of the student population.

The grass swayed calmly in the wind completely unaware of the two beings heading towards it at the speed of a bullet. The sound of the ball whizzing behind him was terrifying, more so than the screams of terror around him, the shouts of warning and even the angry voice of the girl whose broom he was borrowing. Sixty feet, fifty, twenty, the ground loomed nearer. Ten feet. If he didn't pull out soon he would crash. Five feet. With all the strength he possessed in both his artificial and real arm, Harry tried to pull the handle of the broomstick up level with the ground a mere two feet below him.

Harry breathed a great sigh of relief when he heard the Bludger crash into the ground and he pulled up with just an inch to go from the ground. The whole that the ferocious ball had created was smouldering slightly and he felt sure the Bludger would not bother him again. He dismounted gracefully and glared up at the congregation who were staring at him in amazement.

"This school," he shouted loud and clearly. "Sucks!"

A whirling sound distracted him. Behind him Harry saw the Slytherin Seeker still following the snitch flying low and heading directly at him. Harry gave the boy a withering look and took hold of the tiny golden ball as it flew past. Really, the wizarding world was excited by *that*?

Casually releasing and capturing the snitch as he went, Harry walked off the pitch ending the extremely dull game in much confusion of the spectators. It took a surprisingly long half hour for anyone to find him sitting in his dormitory reading his Charms book.

"Where did *you* learn to fly like *that*?" Ron asked.

"Who cares?"

"I do," a burly fifth year boy said. "I'm Oliver Wood, captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team."

Harry rolled his eyes. Sure one minute they were at his throat the next they wanted his help for something. Bloody Gryffindors. "Good for you." He turned back to his book but Wood was not so easily discouraged.

"I don't care how you learnt to fly like that but I haven't seen anyone pull off a dive that spectacular since Charlie Weasley and *he* could have played for England. I'll talk to McGonagall about making an exception to the first year rule but you have to join the Quidditch team. We could flatten the Slytherins!"

"That's nice."

"From the looks of it you've obviously been practising so you must enjoy flying! Come on, what do you say?"

"Actually I don't particularly like heights. That was my first time on a broomstick," Harry replied airily. How on earth did you get rid of the boy?

"You don't – that was your *first time* flying?" Wood looked like Christmas had come early and that he was about to hug him. Harry shifted away from him slightly just to be careful.

"What's wrong with you, White? Why won't you join? We finally have a chance to beat the Slytherins! Or maybe you don't want us to seeing as you're nothing but a dirty Slytherin yourself," Ron growled. Evidently Quidditch meant a lot to him.

"I don't see why I should really. The game is pathetic."

Wood nearly exploded. In fact, he did. "Pathetic? *Pathetic?* Quidditch is the best game in the ruddy world! Now listen here, White. We *need* you on the team. We've finally got an opportunity to wipe the Slytherin smirks off their faces and I won't let you blow the chance." He continued on for several minutes during which Harry continued to read his book.

"The answer is no, Wood," he said after a long few minutes. "I have better things to do with my time than play your stupid games." Harry left the dormitory, leaving a spluttering fifth year behind him and headed in the direction of the library.

Walking down a flight of stairs he was interrupted by the voice of an increasingly annoying girl. "Harry!" Hermione called after him. "Wait!"

He glanced nervously around for other people who might be listening. "How many times have I told you," he hissed. "Not to call me that." Firmly grasping her elbow he steered her towards a broom cupboard. "What is it *now*?"

"Why was that Bludger trying to attack you?" she asked eagerly.

"How the hell should I know? Clearly someone wants me dead." Hermione had been bothering him constantly for the past month attempting to befriend him and he had done his best to discourage her. Unfortunately Harry was not a magician and had not managed to keep her at bay completely. She had insisted on sitting beside him in most classes and because no one particularly liked her, even if he arrived late he would end up sitting next to her. Much as he hated to admit, it he was starting to find the girl tolerable but he knew he shouldn't. If Harry befriended Hermione misfortune would not be far away from her. Just like...

"But you didn't have to take someone's broom right from under them! That dive! You could have died!" Oh joy, thought Harry. She felt worried about him.

"Look what's it matter to you? It shouldn't. Right? I'm not Harry Potter any more. Dumbledore's taken care of that. Got it? He's dead. Gone. And I'd like you to remember that. Since you found out, you started trying to be my friend, which is exactly what's wrong with the world. I'm happy being Jeremy. Leave me alone. I don't *want* friends."

"But Harry –"

"No! I'm not Harry Potter anymore. Good bye."

The whole of the school buzzed for days about his amazing feat on the broomstick but nobody beside Hermione questioned the motive of the Bludger. It was rather odd really seeing as nothing would have happened if the Bludger hadn't decided that he needed knocking off a non-existent broomstick.

Harry was nearly certain that Dumbledore had nothing to do with the Bludger: he didn't make it do anything nor did he stop it. In Harry's eyes this was just as bad as charming it to go after him in the first

place. He had no clue whatsoever as to who had jinxed the bludger, but he was perfectly sure they knew who he really was. It would have taken some powerful magic to charm an object as powerful as that and no student would have been able to do it, unless they were *extremely* talented. The Bludger couldn't have been a plant either; it would have tried to attack him from the beginning of the game instead of the middle. No matter how long he thought about it, Harry could get no wiser about the situation.

Professor McGonagall entered the Gryffindor common room one evening to make a list of all the students staying at Hogwarts over the Christmas holidays. The Weasleys begrudgingly signed up along with a few others but Harry remained firmly seated in a comfortable armchair studying a book from the library. There was no way he'd stay at the school for any longer than necessary. Beside that, he was desperate to see Nymph again and all his other comrades from the streets. He missed them all terribly and letters were few and far between. For a present for her, he had conjured a silver chain and a dagger pendant. He had charmed it so that it would change colour to fit her mood, quite an advanced piece of magic and he was proud of it. A good few of Harry's evenings had been spent perfecting it.

"Mr White? A word please," McGonagall said once she had finished her list of students.

Slowly Harry followed her outside the portrait hole to where they would not be overheard.

"While I respect your decision about joining the Gryffindor Quidditch team, I can only encourage you to reconsider. It would be a great way to make friends and would greatly help our team."

"Is that *all*?" asked Harry, annoyed. She dragged him out of the common room to ask him to join their blasted Quidditch team again?

"The headmaster also requests that you stay at Hogwarts for the duration of the Christmas holidays."

Well that explained it. Harry felt as though a bomb had just fallen upon his head. He knew he wouldn't be able to leave now but there was no point in letting them rule his life without a fight.

“Well tough. I’m not staying.”

“The headmaster insists, Potter,” McGonagall said irritably.

“Well then there’s no point in me arguing with you, is there? I’ll go argue with *him*,” and he stomped off in the direction of the stone gargoyle guarding the entrance to Dumbledore’s office. A plan was already forming in his mind. If he couldn’t see Nymph, well he’d see someone else.

“I’m not staying for Christmas,” Harry said authoritatively once he had opened the large wooden door, without permission to do so naturally.

“Do you mind, Potter? We *were* in the middle of a private discussion.”

“Nope, not really. Continue if you like, Batty.” Snape was seated in the chair opposite Dumbledore’s.

“You most certainly will stay,” said Dumbledore, ignoring Snape completely. “You are far too likely to run off should you be left to your own devices.”

“I have some people I need to see so I will be going to see them whether you like it or not!”

“I’m sorry, Harry, but I cannot allow it. You are simply not safe out there.” Harry rolled his eyes.

“Fine I’ll stay.”

Dumbledore clapped his hands together, smiled and opened his mouth to speak.

“If you let me see Sirius.”

Harry disembarked from the small magical rowing boat, shivering and wrapping his somewhat shabby cloak tighter around him against the cold. His breath and that of McGonagall's rose before them in a heavy mist and Harry was sure that if it were even one degree colder, it would become ice before their very eyes. Somehow, if it were possible in the dead of winter, the nearer they had gotten to this strange island, the colder it became. Later he learnt that this was one of the effects of the Dementors that guarded the prison.

Surprisingly it had not taken much arguing with Dumbledore to allow him to see Sirius, only half an hour. Eventually, after much negotiation, Harry was allowed to visit Azkaban as long as McGonagall accompanied him. Another demand that he had made (that was granted) was that there be no Dementors present whilst he and Sirius were talking; Harry did not have much inclination to feel the somewhat less than pleasant effects of their close contact.

A small, muggle-school sized building rose before them out of the cold mist that surrounded the island. The building was made of black stone (probably to hide years of accumulated filth, unless that was accumulated filth) with few barred windows and only one visible entrance that was guarded by two pale-looking aurors with bored expressions on their faces. If any building looked like a foreboding prison, this was it. The building gave off an aura of encasement and was the only visible object on the small island.

As McGonagall and Harry reached the two aurors, they were wordlessly cast spells upon by the aurors' wands. This was to remove any and all weapons they were harbouring in the hopes of letting a prisoner kill himself, or escape. Harry, having been informed of this inspection prior to his departure, had taken care to remove each of his three knives and wand and stashed them safely away from prying eyes. One of the two aurors nodded his head and they were permitted to go through.

As soon as they had passed under the small archway that served as the entrance to Azkaban Prison, McGonagall and Harry were

immediately bombarded with the sounds of frantic mutters, crazed shouts and the occasional terrified screams of the many inhabitants. Thankfully, visitors had a spell cast upon them on enter that prevented most of the effects of the Dementors unless they were at close quarters, but as Harry had requested, none were.

Sinister torches hung from brackets along walls either side, illuminating heavy wooden doors, that were no doubt secured by magic, with a single small barred window. Here, above ground level, was where the less dangerous prisoners were kept who had committed less serious crimes and were not sentenced to life. There were fewer Dementors that would prowl these corridors but enough that it was a miserable experience for all.

McGonagall lead the way, having been instructed on how exactly to get to Sirius's cell, through many long corridors of doors which eventually began to slope downwards underground to where more serious cases were kept. Sirius, being "a crazed supporter of You-Know-Who, and murderer of many" was kept in one of the lowest cells making it damp, even colder and more uncomfortable. Every now and then one of the inmates would fly to their door as they saw them passing muttering fervently.

At long, long last, when drops of water slowly trickled down the stone walls and the cold bit at their faces angrily, McGonagall came to a halt outside a door, identical to all the others. It was Sirius's cell. Harry only hoped that he had still retained his sanity despite the long exposure to the Dementors he had suffered. Downing a potion that would remove the effects of Harry's appearance potion for an hour (it had been difficult to find, but it had been done), he instructed McGonagall to wait outside the door, which she did without comment, and entered the cell.

For one sickening moment, when Harry first layed eyes on Sirius, he thought that he had indeed lost his mind. The man was lying on a hard-looking bed and was in terrible condition. His face was pale and gaunt, his striped prison robes hanging loosely on his thin frame. His eyes were worst of all. They were dull and shone desperately out of hollow sockets. All in all, he looked like Harry would have imagined a living corpse would.

"There were no spells in place, and I have added the silencing charm," Sir declared. Harry and Sir had decided that it would be best if they checked for spells designed to listen into their conversation and then, to make sure McGonagall did not eavesdrop and since Harry would be without his wand, Sir had agreed to do it, much to his surprise. Now that he thought about it, Sir had no physical body that he was aware of, therefore did not have a wand, so how did he cast spells? Harry put this thought aside to ask later.

"Sirius?" He asked tentatively when the man made no move to acknowledge Harry's presence.

Abruptly the man sat up with a start. "I'm innocent!" He exclaimed, eyes darting madly from side to side. Harry's heart sank.

"I know." He said softly. Sirius's behaviour was certainly not normal behaviour; perhaps he had spent too long in Azkaban already. His hopes rose a little, however, when the man in question gasped.

"Harry?" His voice was hoarse, as if it didn't receive too much use.

"Hello Sirius."

He tried to say something but it came out merely as a croak, and had to cough before trying again. "What are you... how did you... why?" Harry smiled. Perhaps there was hope after all; Sirius clearly recognised him and his splutterings were as like to be from surprise as madness.

"I have come for a chat." He didn't have anything too important to say to him. All Harry really wanted Sirius to know was that he was alive (he had no idea what news had reached him and what hadn't), that he knew of his innocence and that he suspected Dumbledore did too.

"Harry, you have to believe me! I didn't - I would never! - betray Lily and James! I was framed! Peter did it! I'm innocent! Peter cut off his own finger and turned into a rat - we were all animagi! I-" He cut off when Harry raised a hand to slow down his tirade.

"I know, Sirius." Well at least he was forming whole sentences now; that was surely a good sign.

"I - you wha -how?" So much for that theory. Sirius was now opening and closing his mouth, looking very much like a fish out of water.

"My aunt told me everything before she died." There was no point explaining the whole story to him just yet. Too much information when he was so unused to human contact might be a bit too much to handle especially when everyday he might be threatened with insanity over memories from the Dementors.

"How did- Lily's sister? How...?" Maybe it was just Sirius's lack of human contact that made him trail off at the end of sentences. Harry wouldn't put it past himself not to do the same if he had spent years at a time without having another human being to talk to.

"She and my mother were quite close, but there's something else." He needed to tell Sirius about Dumbledore knowing, needed him to *understand*. He didn't really understand it, but he had a desperation inside of himself for someone else to know, to share, his hatred of Dumbledore. Someone substantial. Maybe it was his constant feeling of solitary, even when he was surrounded by people. Or maybe he was just warning Sirius. After all, he didn't want his companionship; people got hurt that way. And he wanted to extract his own revenge on Dumbledore, right from under his nose.

"I think Dumbledore knows too."

Sirius closed his mouth in surprise. "N-n-no Harry. You're wrong. He can't - couldn't. Dumbledore's a great man. Wouldn't put an innocent man in prison. No. Why would he?"

Harry sighed. Another mindless follower of Dumbledore's. Ignorance was not quite bliss for them. "Dumbledore's not that great. What if he didn't say anything because he wanted the Dark Lord to attack me? He might have known what would happen and then didn't want to say anything afterwards because if you went to Azkaban, I would have to grow up in the muggle world with my aunt." In truth Harry had spent many a night considering why Dumbledore would have done what he did and had finally concluded that these reasons seemed the most logical.

Sirius, however, shook his shaggy head. "No. You're wrong. Dumbledore would never do something like that. He's the leader for the light!" Well at least he was back up to full sentences.

"Then we have nothing more to say to each other." He was unexplainably sad that Sirius was so narrow minded when it came to Dumbledore. "But know this, Sirius Black. You are innocent. I know you are and Peter Pettigrew knows you are and Dumbledore knows you are. If you ever get out of this place, I will help you prove your innocence. You are not alone."

Harry left the cell without so much as a backwards glance, to where McGonagall was waiting to return him to Hogwarts.

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By the time Harry was escorted to the Gryffindor common room by McGonagall that evening, the majority of the pupils had long since left on the Hogwarts Express for their various homes. To his dismay, the Weasley brothers had opted for staying at Hogwarts that Christmas for whatever reason. Only three others from Gryffindor remained, all older students that Harry did not know the names of. The rest of the school houses were similarly emptied.

Upon entering the garishly decorated common room, he was greeted by the less than pleasant sight of Ron, sitting with the twins, chatting amiably beside the roaring fire. All of them stopped when they saw him enter. "Oh no," Ron groaned. "I thought you *left*." His whine was sincere enough if a little pathetic, giving Harry the impression that they had truly not known he was staying despite the fact that his trunk was still upstairs in their dorm.

He gave them a scathing look. "The feeling is mutual."

"I shouldn't be surprised though," Ron continued. "After all, who would want *you* staying near them at Christmas?" Fred and George laughed and, to their surprise, so did Harry.

"That's rich coming from *you*. Or have you failed to notice that you actually *are* unwanted at home?"

The twins sprang to their feet in outrage and Ron's ears turned red. "Our parents are visiting our brother in *Romania*. So really its *your* parents that don't want *you*."

Harry didn't know quite how to respond to that. He couldn't very well tell the Weasley brothers that his parents were dead after having been led to their deaths by the very headmaster of the school at which they were currently attending. Thankfully he was saved from answering when Fred - or was it George? - cut in.

"If you didn't go home, *White*, then where were you? We've noticed you don't spend a lot of time in the tower, and for sure you're not hanging out with *friends*." He and his twin shared significant looks, though the meaning behind them was lost on Harry and, by the look of confusion on his face, Ron.

It was an odd question, though Harry could guess at the reason behind it. He was sure the twins knew he had added a potion to their food that day, a few weeks ago now, that had made them become so suspicious of each other which would, had they been more normal and less prankster, have led them into a potentially fatal duel. This, accompanied with the fact that they still had an unhidden quest to prank Harry, now drew him to the conclusion that they could be seeking a way to find where he spent the majority of his time in order to unleash a prank on him. It could only be assumed that normally they would consult the Marauders' Map that was currently in his possession.

"I don't believe that is any of *your* concern," he replied coolly. He turned to go to his dormitory, only pausing when one of the twins asked where he was going. "I don't wish to spend any more time with mindless *Gryffindors* than I absolutely have to. Filth like you might be contagious." He continued on his way, oblivious to the speculative conversation that the twins were about to have.

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Fred and George, after sending Ron away to play chess with Percy, bent their heads lower together. "It could just be that he's anti-social - I mean, we have no proof yet," Fred murmured so he wouldn't be overheard.

"But don't you think it's all a bit coincidental? He'd have to be a first year and it's definitely not anyone else in the year, if its anyone," George replied in an equally low murmur.

"I suppose... Did you notice he stopped going to detention after he saved that Granger girl from the troll on Halloween? And from what we've heard, the teachers haven't giving him any more."

"He stopped doing stuff to get them, that's why. Had a right old change of heart didn't he? No reason why though."

"Something happened with the troll that night, that's for sure. I think that's when the teachers found out."

"It's definitely possible. No one knows anything about him. Where he comes from, who his parents are or anything."

"Except what Malfoy said got a reaction out of him at their flying lessons, d'you remember? Ron was practically glowing that he'd hit him."

"His appearance is always the same, too. His hair hasn't grown an inch since we've come to Hogwarts. The only difference is when that prank we tried didn't work and turned his hair green."

"Yeah, that's right. Do you remember how he kind of choked? Like he was suffocating or something."

"Maybe he's allergic to something that was in the potion."

"Or maybe it counteracts with something he's already taken."

"..." They fell silent for a moment considering this.

"Granger was there that night - on Halloween, I mean. D'you think we'd find out anything from her?"

"Maybe, but wouldn't the teachers have made sure she kept her tongue about what happened?" Fred glanced round the room cautiously.

"I guess there's only one way to find out then."

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking, dear brother?"

"I believe I am, oh twin of mine."

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Meanwhile, sitting on his ridiculously soft bed, Harry was having a completely unheard conversation of his own. "So I get that you're, well, living, in my head and all, but how can you do magic if you don't have a wand of your own? I mean, you can't touch the physical world, can you? Without a body and all." He had finally gotten round to asking how Sir performed magical spells if he was incapable of doing anything else on his own.

"Once again, boy, you have displayed your incredible ineptitude to grasp knowledge that any five year old pureblood would know. In essence, it is similar to wandless magic, though you would know nothing much of that yet. One day you will learn it, if you ever manage to, incredible though it may sound, learn something."

"I am able to perform magical incantations and spells by drawing on surrounding magic using you as a vessel. I can channel magic through you, your wand helps this process which I might not be capable of in my weakened state, and bend it to my will, thus creating the effect of magic."

Harry frowned. That pretty much made sense, he supposed, although it was a little disconcerting to learn that he was being used as a tool for magic without even realising it. This was also the first time Sir had referred to his living status, assuming he was alive. That he had called it his "weakened state" suggested that he had not always been a disembodied voice though, Harry admitted, it had been rather foolish that he had never thought of Sir as being anything else. He knew better than to inquire any further, however. Instead he asked,

"So what *will* you be teaching me? I've nearly learnt all the first year spells now so you must have something planned."

"It is my intention, brat, for you to next learn to use these spells effectively. In other words, to use them creatively that it might help you during a duel. Even the simplest of spells can be effective if used imaginatively. After you have grasped that concept, though I appreciate with your mental capabilities that may take considerable time, I shall have you learn the same spells silently. If, by some miracle, you manage to achieve that before summer, I may consider instructing you to cast a few without your wand but do not get too hopeful. I highly doubt you will progress that far."

Only one word entered Harry's mind as he listened to Sir. Cool.

Fred and George grinned at each other through their disillusionment charms as they stood stationary at either side of the entrance to the Gryffindor common room. After several days they had discovered that White rose *very* early in the morning and so were waiting eagerly for him to emerge from the tower and go do whatever it was he did. It had also been a bit of a shock to them to notice that White did not sleep on his bed, like any normal person, but rather opted for the hard floor, still wearing his gloves, beside it with only a thin sheet for his covers despite the cold weather but this only helped to further their suspicions of him.

The portrait of the fat lady swung open, almost hitting George on the nose, and White emerged. Though they couldn't see each other through their disillusionment charms, their grins widened and as one they stepped forward silently to follow the small boy. They had gone no more than three corridors, however, when White removed his wand from his robes and began to twirl it in his gloved hands. He glanced behind, as if suspecting that someone was following him, but appeared to shrug it off and continued, albeit in a slightly different direction. Fred and George breathed a silent sigh of relief in unison.

Surprisingly White led them on the familiar path to the entrance hall. Surely he didn't get up before five o'clock to simply go for a stroll around the lake? They knew he wasn't very sociable, but he couldn't actually go for a stroll all the many hours that he was absent from the Gryffindor tower. Unless they had chosen a dull time to follow him and he had decided that today he felt like a walk. George and Fred felt their certainty waver.

Indeed, White did lead them out onto the grounds and strode without fault towards the lake. The twins were just considering turning back when he changed direction slightly, and started heading towards a clump of trees that concealed the grounds behind them from view. In case White was using these trees for cover for whatever he did, Fred and George followed. Once firmly hidden from the view of the school, White turned round, wand held ready, glaring at where they had halted.

He muttered something and gave a swish of his wand and they felt their disillusionment charms slip away. "Heh, heh, how's it going?" Fred said nervously.

"What -" White began menacingly but cut off as if someone had interrupted him. A strange smirk came upon his face and a strange glint in his eyes and he started again. "I believe I told you that it was none of your concern where I spent my spare time. I think I may not have been clear enough, eh? I shall have to remedy that."

Fred and George glanced at each other and gulped. Maybe it was the fact that White was prepared for them this time rather than taken by surprise as he was before, but somehow he seemed more... in control, than before. His way of speaking too, was different. It was more aristocratic than before; it sounded like the way the Malfoy boy would speak but no matter which one of them it was, it sounded wrong on an eleven year-old-boy. Holding their wands in front of them, they were not as confident as they had been in their last encounter of this nature with White. Something about him was... off. He almost seemed to inspire fear in them.

"Enough talk. Expelliarmus!" White moved so quickly, with such precision, that neither twin had any chance of defending themselves. It was incredible! White almost seemed like an expert duellist. The smirk that spread on his face was more than a little disconcerting. The evil glint in his dark - wait, dark eyes? Hadn't they been a lighter, emerald, green before?

The twins could do nothing as he pointed his wand at their feet and muttered the incantation that they recognised as the one to turn objects into needles. Immediately long, imperturbable needles shot up piercing through their shoes and feet. As in their usual unison, they both gasped in pain and fell backwards, their feet firmly stuck to the ground with the needles that were protruding upwards.

"Engorgio," White hissed. The needles so firmly stuck in their feet, expanded in size provoking more than gasps of pain. He then proceeded to cast a hair growth charm on both twins until they had waist-length hair then used a separating charm to let the hair attempt to pull their heads in two directions.

"Waddiwasi!" Handfuls of nearby pebbles suddenly came to life and started pelting themselves against the immobile Weasley twins. They rebounded off them and shot towards them once more.

"Wingardium Leviosa!" White uprooted a couple of trees then dropped them rather unceremoniously on top of each of the twins, right across their stomachs. They weren't small trees. In fact, they were rather large trees and so hurt a *lot*. "Silencio!" The twins moans of anguish fell silent, though they still tried to make them.

"You *will* leave me alone, will you not, twits? You will not pry any further into the life of Jeremy Hart White. But by all means, tell your little friends of this. Tell them of Jeremy Hart White's power! Let the whole school know of my wrath and my hatred of this infernal place. And if I find you prying into my affairs again, I will not be so lenient. Don't worry, someone shall find you... *eventually*. Incendio! Lumos!"

The trees pressing their heavy weights down on the two boys chests making breathing difficult caught fire at once, the flames licking and burning their skin. Still silently screaming, they had no defence either against the bright light than was so extraordinary that it blinded them. They did not know that they would regain their vision after a day or so.

Still trying to scream in pain, the laughter of Jeremy Hart White filled their ears over the roar of the fires as he walked away. It was a bliss when, at last, Fred and George passed out.

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Harry, white as a sheet and shaking, leaned back against the wall of the hidden room he normally used to practise magic in. He could not believe what had happened. He had watched in morbid fascination as Sir took control of his body, leaving him completely unable to do anything, let alone attempt to stop Sir as he took revenge on the Weasley twins for him.

"And that, boy, is how to use spells creatively."

"You didn't need to do that," Harry muttered, appalled by what had happened. Sir could have just left them disarmed and they would be no threat. There was no need to do... *that*.

"On the contrary, had I not attacked them so they would most likely be more inclined to attempt to spy on you again. This way they will fear you and so leave you alone. When they are found they will no doubt tell the whole of Gryffindor, when they return, who will in turn inform the rest of the school. If you can make them fear you, they will be under your control. Eventually they will obey you. Fear is the key."

Harry frowned. Was it really necessary for the whole school to obey his commands? He didn't even *have* any commands. What was the point in controlling people if you had nothing to do with them? Perfectly content to go unnoticed as he was, Harry was not really convinced that he wanted to control anyone especially if it meant attacking them so brutally. What Sir had done was *wrong*. It seemed as bad as using the Dark Arts.

Sir, as if sensing his thoughts, asked, *"What do you define as a dark spell?"*

"A spell created for pain or torture."

"Wrong! Any spell can be used for pain or torture, foolish boy. Did I not just demonstrate so? What the idiotic ministry for magic class as a dark spell is a spell that needs a lot of power and will to cast that they see as not having any other purpose. The transfiguration of objects into needles was originally created for the use I have just demonstrated yet they teach that to first years! Similarly some "dark spells" were created not for pain but other uses. One spell was created to remove valuable rocks from the earth but when used on another human, as one wizard did, it will wrench their insides out causing immense pain. The ministry then decided that this must be a dark spell.

"So, boy, if light spells can be classed as dark, and dark as light, what is the difference?"

Frowning again, Harry considered this. If what Sir was saying was true, and he had not yet lied to his knowledge, then there was no definite distinction between the two branches of magic. "There is none? Only the intentions of the caster."

Strangely enough, Harry could have sworn Sir smiled, which was odd considering he didn't have a body. *"Correct. There is no good and evil, only power."*

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Shifting his meagre breakfast around his plate, several hours later, Harry could not help but feel uneasy. Reason or not, what Sir had done was definitely twisted and would have consequences. Not only had Sir not forbidden the twins to reveal Harry as the culprit, he had *encouraged* it. If - *when* - they were found, he would be in considerable trouble. He had no idea what he would say to Dumbledore or any other teacher as to why he had done it. Telling them he had his body taken over temporarily by a disembodied voice with questionable motives wasn't really an option and he was pretty certain that Sir would stop him even if he tried.

Sir. Harry had more doubts in him now than ever. Sure, he had never known much about him other than that he hated Dumbledore but Harry had not thought him as the type of being to do something so, well, sadistic. The fact that he had also lost control of his body was slightly worrying as well. If Sir eventually turned out to be evil (or insane, or *both*) and could take hold of his body and use it as his own on will, well, it wasn't even thinkable.

It did nothing to ease his nerves when, at the usual time hundreds of owls would flock into the great hall, two owls flew in, one delivering a perfectly innocent letter to a Ravenclaw boy and the other dropping a smouldering red envelope in front of him. Harry prodded it with his still-not-used fork. It emitted a hiss of steam but continued to smoulder.

"Take the letter and run! Outside, now!"

"What?" That was a rather strange command, thought Harry.

"Just do it! You'll thank me later." Not even hesitating, he grabbed the now violently steaming envelope and swiftly ran out of the hall, not paying attention to the intrigued looks of the few students and teachers that had remained. While he was somewhat out of practise and therefore not quite as fast as he had been before he had started

attending Hogwarts, Harry was still a fast runner. It took him no time at all to reach the grounds outside a hundred metres from the school where the letter promptly exploded.

"HARRY BLOODY POTTER! A can' believe yer not even bloody comin' back fer Christmas! We both know that if ye wanted to ye could get back here Dumbledore or no! If this is some bloody attempt at keepin' me safe 'cause am not with you then I swear am not lettin' ye leave again withou' me! Ye need to be with us normal people instead of them an' you bloody well know it! Or maybe yer not comin' back 'cause ye don' trust me! That's it init? Bloody trust again!"

Nymph's angry voice continued to rant at him for another full five minutes. Harry found himself immensely grateful that he was away from prying eyes and ears as she obviously had no restraint when it came to referring to him by Harry Potter. Abruptly her tone of voice changed from an angry tyrant to one of sadness.

"Don' let 'em get their claws in so far that ye can' break free, Harry. Gods, I mess ye. Come back, Harry. Come back."

The remains of the envelope burst into flames and were soon naught but ashes. "Stupid girl," Harry muttered in irritation. If that had exploded where others could hear it, his secret would have been disclosed to more than just Granger (she had thankfully gone home for the holidays). "What was *that*?"

"That, was a howler. It is traditionally used by parents for shouting at their children while they are staying away from home."

Nymph never failed to amaze Harry. This "howler" was obviously an invention of magic yet somehow she had managed to create one. Perhaps she had come from a magical family before she somehow ended up on the streets. Harry had never actually found out why she had known about the magical world; finding out had meant telling her about his Sir and the centaur and for some reason he didn't really feel that was knowledge he should spread around freely. His thoughts were cut off, however, when the doors of the school opened and a smirking Ron Weasley strode across the grass to where he was standing.

"Well, well," Weasley called gleefully, when he was ten paces away. "I heard you got a *howler*, White! Heard you ran away with it like a little girl too! What's wrong? Afraid of getting into a little trouble, are we?"

Harry sneered at him and was about to make a snide remark when two identical screams sounded from a small cluster of trees beside the lake. If it had looked less suspicious, he would have groaned. He knew those screams; it was the Weasley twins.

Ron, on the other hand, looked somewhat scared. "That sounded like..." The screams sounded again but this time they seemed slightly strained. "Fred? George?" he yelped. "What did you do to them?"

Purely for show, Harry smirked. Inside, of course, he was a twist of nerves and guilt. "Why don't you go and find out?" If he was to be found out, it would probably be better to do it on his own terms.

The screams sounded again, this time much fainter. "I'm getting Dumbledore!" And without waiting for a reply - or snide remark - Ron shot off at a run towards the school and it was all Harry could do to shout "Go get your precious Dumbledore then!" before he had disappeared through the doors. Resigned to his fate, Harry set off towards the clump of trees, knowing that within minutes he would have to face the wrath of Dumbledore when he discovered what he had done.

He was almost at the trees when he was joined by an out of breath Ron and a frowning Dumbledore. The former sent him a glare and the latter an intrigued look. Together they rounded the clump and looked at the site before them.

The trees that had been on top of the Weasley twins had long since been burnt to ashes. The twins were a mass of blood, burnt flesh and cuts. Their feet were still firmly stuck to the ground with the large needled protruding grotesquely from their feet. Their torsos were marred and peeling with heavy burns and thin strips of burnt clothing clinging to their wounds. The waist-length hair was gone, it too having been destroyed by the fire. All across their bodies were wounds from the pebbles that had assaulted them and their eyes were staring feebly up into space, not seeing anything.

A look of surprise flashed across Dumbledore's face before being hidden beneath a mask of solemnity. He addressed Ron before turning to the twins. "Get Madam Pomfrey! Who did this to you?"

"It was," croaked George, obviously having trouble breathing.

"White," finished Fred, with as much difficulty.

Ron, who had still not moved, rounded on Harry. "What did you do?" he hissed.

Physically refraining himself from shaking, he sneered, "Wouldn't you like to know."

At a look from Dumbledore, Ron stopped, his mouth half open, from saying something else and took off towards the school again, in search of Madam Pomfrey.

"He's," Fred rasped, with even more strain.

"Harry Potter," wheezed George.

Harry's heart plummeted into his stomach. How had *they* known? Granger was one thing, but these two? They must have heard the howler across the grounds. Mentally he cursed Nymph. He could feel Dumbledore's eyes on him.

"Punish them." Harry blinked in surprise. Punish them? Why? They were in certainly no position to do much damage. *"So that they know they are not to speak of that again. Kick them. Hard. If you do not, I will and worse,"* Sir answered his unasked question. If Sir were a physical being, Harry would kick *him*. Right now, he hated every inch of him. It was one thing for Sir to have taken control of his body and attacked the Weasleys but it was quite another for him to expect Harry to do the same. Steeling himself, knowing that he was saving them from a worse fate, Harry went over to the mounds of filth that was the Weasley twins and gave each a hard kick in the ribs.

"Harry Potter is dead," he said coldly (which didn't take a lot of effort if he thought of Sir while saying it) before he felt himself thrown backwards through the air with magic and slammed against a tree

trunk. Sliding down to the base, Harry found himself unable to move with Dumbledore's cold gaze upon him.

"I will *not* tolerate this type of behaviour in my school." There was a cold fury in Dumbledore's voice. If Harry had met his eyes, he would have seen a similar fury in them. "I do not care what I have supposedly done nor how little you wish to be here, you will *not* treat your fellow students this way! As long as you are at this school, you will *not* attack another student. *Have I made myself clear?*"

Glaring at his nose, Harry asked, "An' if I can' *refrain* myself?" Refraining himself shouldn't be *too* difficult but refraining Sir might be another matter. It would be better to know what would happen if he ever lost control again.

If possible, Dumbledore became even more furious. "*There will not be a repeat of this incidence!*" Well that settled that then. As one, the Weasley twins who had lain on the ground between them unnoticed, groaned and fell unconscious. "You have broken our agreement, Harry."

Technically he hadn't. *Technically* it was Sir who had attacked the twins but Harry didn't really think this was a good arguing point. There wasn't really any foreseeable way to worm his way out of the situation. "I was defendin' myself," he muttered. Well, he *would* have been defending himself if *someone* hadn't taken matters into their own hands. Harry felt sick and the throbbing pain from where his head had met the tree behind him didn't help.

Dumbledore's eyes bore coldly into his own though he refused to meet them. "*This* was not in defence. What you have done is incredibly wrong, Harry."

Harry bristled in annoyance. As if he didn't know that already! Did Dumbledore truly think he was heartless? Harry knew he appeared cold at times but surely he did not appear the type of person who would attack a defenceless person? Well, he supposed, after this incident he might well. And of course there would be no stopping Ron telling the entire world what he had done let alone the twins who had been *ordered* by "him" to do so.

Thankfully he was saved from answering the old coot when a panting Ron - he had obviously run - arrived with a dishevelled Madam Pomfrey. The nurse took a horrified look at the Weasley twins and then a confused look at Harry who was still pinned with magic against the tree. Immediately she started to inspect the bloody mounds that were the Weasley twins.

"What spells were used here?" she asked without pausing in her inspections. Her face was frowning and she seemed more bee-like than ever. Obviously she was not pleased with what she was looking at. Dumbledore turned to Harry expectantly who recited all the spells that had been used in chronological order in a dull voice. Madam Pomfrey tsked but set to healing some of the minor injuries.

"They have lost a lot of blood," she informed Dumbledore. "And their ribs and lungs have been crushed. They have been blinded temporarily and I do not like the look of some of these burns. The cuts are deep but should not pose too much of a problem as with the superficial scrapes on their heads. Their feet," Here she even shuddered. "Will need attending to. I cannot remove the needles yet for fear of damaging them further."

It did not take long for Dumbledore to remove the needles from the ground but firmly attached to the twins' feet, and for Madam Pomfrey to take them away on stretchers after looking uncertainly at Harry. Ron stood uncertainly, clearly wondering whether he should accompany her or confront Harry.

"It would be best if you alert your brothers to the situation Mister Weasley," Dumbledore said firmly and of course what the mighty Dumbledore said was final. Ron nodded and scampered off. It was only then that Harry was released from the invisible restraints holding him to the tree. He stood up and swayed slightly as the world spun before him. All of a sudden he was feeling immensely tired. Theoretically his body had done a lot even if his mind hadn't told it to. Sir taking hold of it may have zapped some of his energy as well.

Harry stole a glance at Dumbledore who was observing him, still frowning, with signs of anger still remaining on his wizened face. He was as much as enigma as ever. Some of the things he did were

just... crazy. Like putting an innocent man in Azkaban just so he would grow up with muggles and not be prejudiced, or allowing innocent lives to be wasted so that something that may or may not have happened had the opportunity to. Then when something like a common schoolboy fight (well maybe not a common fight, but surely worse injuries had to have occurred when two, in this case three, pupils fought) and he suddenly became furious that someone had harmed another being. Wasn't that a *lad* hypocritical? After all, no one had been hurt beyond repair (he hoped).

"Why did you do it?" Dumbledore asked suddenly after the silence had stretched on for a moment. Harry, just managing not to give in to the urge to collapse to the ground, blinked. That was a bit difficult to answer. After all, *he* didn't do anything and had he had the choice, probably would have left it at a stinging hex or two. Nothing like *that*.

"They pried where they shouldn't have," Harry decided upon, doing his best to sound cool and collected which was no easy feat for someone who was struggling to stay upright. "An' they were annoying me. I couldn't help myself. I mean, trying to spy on *me*? They shoulda known better."

For some bizarre reason, this made Dumbledore's face lose its remaining anger leaving only what Harry could describe as shock or horror. "You have to understand, this is not some trivial thing to be done on mere whim. What you have done here today, it is nothing short of torture! You must understand this, my boy."

My boy? Who was Dumbledore to call him, *my boy*? He did not *own* him! Dumbledore was not even on good terms with him! What Harry heard next only fueled his sudden anger.

Sir chuckled from the recesses of his mind. "*Well done, my boy. I could not have answered that better.*"

If Harry had been holding his wand, he would have dropped it. It was one thing for Dumbledore, who was a senile old man, to call him "my boy" but for a deranged spirit who could possess his body and, as Dumbledore had put it, use it for *torture* to think of him with a sense of *ownership* or *possession* it was just wrong. How could Sir honestly think that after what had happened he would want to be associated

with him? It was, Harry thought, a symbol of his life; everyone always wanted to use him, to *own* him, for their own purposes.

“Who’re you to call me yours?” Harry hissed at Sir, forgetting for the moment that Dumbledore was standing not two meters from him. “I am not *yours* an’ I am not *his*.” By “his” he was referring to the bumbling idiot standing so close though still not really acknowledging his presence. “And I *never* will be.” And with that, Harry left the clump of trees, not noticing that one had caught fire, stumbling only a lot on his way back up to the castle.

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Dumbledore frowned at the pensieve, an ingenious device for storing memories, before him. It had been several hours since Harry had staggered back up to the castle and seemingly disappeared. He had not thought at the time to stop him despite the need to press upon him the severity of what he had done. It had been too shocking. Not because of what the young boy had done, he had seen it before, but *because* he had seen it before. It was alarming how similar the two events were.

The first time Dumbledore had seen a boy do almost exactly what Harry had done, it *had* been horrific. To think that a boy, in his early years of Hogwarts, could not only do something so sadistic but do it by using such simplistic spells was one of the many disturbing things he had witnessed in his many years of living. But it had been years since that first incident and there was absolutely no way Harry could have known about it much less known how much it would shock him. He was certain no other would remember the boy who had originally cast those *exact same spells* in that manner. What was even more incredible still, was that Harry had almost used the exact same words as his excuse for having done so. If he, Albus Dumbledore, had been asked a few hours ago to recall the event, he would not have been able to repeat the excuse so precisely.

The only way that Harry could have done what he did without it being pure coincidence, would be that he had contact with the original culprit but that was impossible. *That* boy, thankfully, was gone and had been gone for many years. There were very few who would

remember him as the schoolboy he had been. No, it was impossible for Harry to have had contact with *him*. It was merely a coincidence, a horrible *horrible* coincidence. Still, the two events were uncannily similar. It was almost as if history were repeating itself.

Dumbledore sighed and stroked his ridiculously long beard. He was aware, of course, that his beard was at impractical proportions but it was very helpful to give him that air of eccentricity which was so useful for inspiring trust in him. He shook his head to clear it of these thoughts. For some reason whenever he thought about complicated matters his mind would occasionally wander onto completely irrelevant topics, like what new muggle sweet had recently been invented.

Harry Potter. Where had he gone so wrong? It had started, he supposed, when his aunt had decided he was ready to be told about the magical community. Dumbledore had created wards to detect this momentous occasion purely so that he could see young Harry's reaction to the news but the wards had turned out more useful than he had planned. He had listened, aghast, as Petunia Evans had told the young boy that he had intended the Potters to die so that Harry would have to face Voldemort. Of course, he had had to stop listening at this first sign of trouble to gather a few trusted wizards and witches to capture Petunia and so missed the rest of the conversation. It had been vital that they question Petunia as to why she believed such ludicrous tales.

When the bizarre group had arrived at young Harry's residence, however, he had disappeared. Incredibly it seemed he had disappeared, an amazing display of accidental magic for one so young. To top things off, Petunia was being protected by a shield which not even he had come across, unfortunately giving the impression that she could do magic and thus must be an imposter. Alastor Moody, paranoid as he was, had automatically assumed that she was a death eater and had no qualms about sending her the killing curse, the only curse that was able to penetrate the amazing shield. This, however, did not really leave Petunia in a fit state for questioning so there was no telling if she was, in fact, a death eater or had been affected by a confound charm.

Consequently, Harry, already confused by this point, then came to the conclusion that he had Petunia murdered to prevent her pinning Harry him. It certainly did not help matters that the young boy, in such a confused state of mind, had disappeared completely. It had been nearly two whole years before he had seen the young boy again and he had certainly changed. Dumbledore had found him very aggressive and with a deep hatred of himself. And cunning too. Somehow Harry had managed to free himself of bonds, fool even himself into thinking there was something wrong with him mentally, and escaped into the dark forest in the grounds of the school where he promptly vanished without a trace again.

It had been a very disturbing time when they had finally discovered a trace of the would-be savior of the wizarding world. Part of an arm, some fingers, and a lot of blood were found along with either werewolf or wolf tracks. Neither boded well. When, months later, there had been no sign on the boy in the wizarding world or the muggle world, the muggle press had to be told of his assumed death. It had been a blessing in disguise when Remus Lupin ran into the small boy when he requested to go to Diagon Alley. How he had discovered the alley was beyond even him but Dumbledore was thankful to know that he was still surviving even if they hadn't managed to return him to the wizarding world.

The next Dumbledore had heard of Harry had been at the sorting when his name was called out on the list. Only names of those who were present were called out but when no one had stepped forward, he had finally accepted that he might have been dead or might never be discovered again. Then when a small boy, though looking nothing like Harry in everything but their eyes, had been called forward he knew there was something, even if he didn't know what, going on at the sorting. He took the liberty of learning the names of every new student each year and so was very disconcerted when one he did not recognize was called out.

The year started without any further hic-ups but he kept a close eye on Jeremy Hart White. He was unsocial and even seemed to go out of his way at times to ward off friendship. It had hardly seemed possible at Halloween when, due to some counter-acting ingredients in the pain relieving potion Severus gave the boy, he turned out to be

Harry Potter. He had been... uncooperative to say the least. All the time he stubbornly stuck to his beliefs that his aunt had told him naught but the truth. What bothered Dumbledore, however, were the gloves the boy wore. Since part of his arm and several fingers had been found in the forest, it intrigued him to know how the boy still functioned, unless he had help from a wizard. It would have been easy for a wizard to remedy the situation for him and create him artificial fingers but what wizard would have helped Harry Potter and not mentioned it? Only one who had ulterior motives, surely, which meant that he might be indebted to the wrong sort of wizard.

Other than that he had been nothing but glad to have Harry back where he belonged despite the need to show him the truth but that would take time. Other than the time he had almost drowned the youngest Weasley boy in the lake, Harry had not behaved too inappropriately. Until now.

The path Harry appeared to be on was both unnerving and frightening. If he turned out at the end of his years of school to be a dark wizard or even a follower of Voldemort's, then in short the wizarding world was doomed. No, he would have to make the boy have a change of heart and preferably before the situation got even further out of hand than it already was. Somehow he knew that he would have to come up with a suitable punishment for the boy and detentions and housepoints had no effect whatsoever. He was not even sure that Harry understood what housepoints were. It was too much to hope that the event would not reach the ears of the majority of Hogwarts. Ronald Weasley would already have informed his brothers and they would inform the remaining pupils and together the whole population of the school would find out within a day. Maybe a day and a half.

To not have any control over events swirling all around him was a feeling Dumbledore had rarely felt before and he wished to remedy it.

Harry let his head fall back against the tree behind him while closing his eyes, immediately regretting the action. There was a small bump that had grown from his earlier encounter with a tree throbbed painfully. Once again he had escaped to the “Forbidden” forest. This time however he was completely willing to let the dark trees refuse to let him leave and he had no inclination to do so. As long as he was in the vast maze of trees and undergrowth, Harry was certain no one could find him if he chose not to. Eventually he would have to return to the school, he knew, but for the moment Harry was perfectly content to hide beneath the branches of the large oak behind him and think about all that he had done already in the day though it was still morning.

For some reason, unthinkable even to himself, he felt he ought to have done something to prevent Sir from “punishing” the Weasel twits. He didn’t even *like* them and, for all he knew, they might have come to as much harm even if Sir hadn’t intervened. There was no way to tell. He still felt guilty though.

Hatred smothered the guilt, however. Hatred for Dumbledore, for the school, for Snape, for Sir. Harry did not like that he had been used; it was exactly what Aunt Petunia had warned him Dumbledore would do in her last words before she died, though it was so long ago now that he was struggling to remember exactly what she had told him. Sir certainly was an enigma; he taught Harry, helped him – occasionally – when he needed it, shared his ambition for revenge on Dumbledore but yet he still managed to betray his trust. Should he still accept lessons from him? This was the next problem for Harry. Did he truly feel comfortable learning from someone who so uncaringly attacked others? No, was the answer he decided upon but if Sir thought Harry was against him he might take control over him indefinitely or turn Harry’s own powers against him as a “punishment”. No, the best thing would be to keep in Sir’s good books no matter how he felt until he could reach a solution to the problem. Sir might even turn out to be a decent person, given the chance. Only time would tell.

The enticing forest around him was eerily quiet. Only a few birds overhead made any noise other than the soft rustle of the wind through the leaves. It was oddly peaceful for a “dark” forest that harboured dangerous creatures like the one that had made him lose his arm. Harry peeled off his gloves and inspected said arm. The dark wood was the same as the day he had gotten it but now it no longer looked foreign there. The fingers and joints moved exactly like a normal arm and if he hadn’t known it was wooden he might never have noticed the difference. The wood reflected the light slightly with a shimmer of gold. Harry blinked in surprise but when he looked back at it, the shimmer was gone and the arm was plain wood once more.

Harry sighed and got up from his seat at the base of the tree. Perhaps his strange lack of normal sleeping hours was finally catching up with him. Nevertheless it was time he returned to the castle and face the punishment that was no doubt awaiting him.

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It had only taken one step into the entrance hall for Harry to be accosted by Dumbledore. Barely a word after that and he found himself being whisked away to the headmaster’s office where, no doubt, they would discuss his punishment for the Weasley affair. Surely enough, that is what Dumbledore intended.

“Tell me, Harry,” he replied whilst looking over the tops of his half-moon spectacles in a much calmer voice than he had used earlier. “What is it that made you attack the Weasley boys?”

Harry frowned at him. Hadn’t he already answered that? “Erm, I already tol’ you. They was –“

“No, no, you misunderstand me. I wish to know, what is it that made you use those particular spells for that particular purpose? Such things are not thought of innocently on the spur of the moment.” Dumbledore was gazing at him intently as though trying to see through him. No doubt if Harry met his eyes he would.

“*Sir*” was the answer that first came to mind but this seemed rather inappropriate and definitely not the one Dumbledore was looking for. But what could he say? Nothing had made him use the spells Sir did;

he did not research and plot evil uses for everyday spells; he did not sit and contemplate various means of torture. So what could he say? He supposed he could say he had read it in some book or other but then Dumbledore would want to know *which* book and he would be drawn-a-blank again.

“Erm, I don’ really know,” he decided upon at last after a few moments pause. “I don’ know many spells so ah jus’ though’ abou’ the best way tae use the ones I did know.” That would have to do and if the old coot wasn’t satisfied then so be it.

For a moment the old man looked pensive sitting behind his large desk. He frowned as if considering something but this too passed within a moment. “The “best” way to use it, Harry? The best things in life hurt no others, my boy.” Harry twitched in annoyance at the use of “my boy” again. “I cannot say that I am not concerned about you. Your use of the spells suggests a cruel and vindictive pleasure was gained whilst using them and this worries me. You see, I have seen an incidence so eerily similar to what has occurred here today that I am puzzled deeply. Once before, I have seen a boy, not much older than yourself, use those exact spells for the same use.”

Harry refrained himself from gasping in surprise. Could it be? Could Sir have been that boy? It was too much of a coincidence to say he wasn’t; maybe it hadn’t been thought of on the spot... *this time*. For all Sir had lectured him about using spells creatively in a duel, he had already used the spells in the exact same way before.

Dumbledore had paused, gauging his reaction. Well, he was not about to interrupt. Perhaps if he remained silent he would be told more about the boy who had done the same as “him”. If he asked, however, it might appear that he was wanting to follow in the boys footsteps whatever they had been or had contact with the boy.

Sighing, Dumbledore continued. “The boy grew up with dark intentions and sadistic pleasures that were ultimately his downfall. He is long gone now but you can see why I am concerned for the path you appear to be on.”

Long gone? Really? It seemed to Harry that the boy was not as gone as Dumbledore thought but he was not to know that. He tried to open

his mouth to ask "Who was he?" but found it cemented shut. Similarly he found he could not move, frozen in his chair.

"I don't think so," Sir chuckled darkly into his mind. He wanted to growl at him.

"Nevertheless," continued the crazy man before him, oblivious to the fact that Harry was incapable of doing anything. Or maybe he wasn't oblivious. Maybe he found it easier to leave him as he was until he got what he wanted to accomplish. "There is the matter of your punishment. Surely you had some thought of the consequences of your actions? No matter who you are, I cannot permit this to go unpunished. I have thought long about what it should be in your absence and I have come up with three options for you.

"The first, is that you continue as you are, Jeremy Hart White, but your wand is confiscated. You will be returned it for brief periods in class when it is required but this time shall be minimal. It appears you cannot be trusted with a wand without attacking a fellow student. In time, when you have proven yourself of good intentions and unlikely to attack another student again, you will be returned your wand."

Attempting to grimace at the prospect of this punishment, Harry found himself still unable to move. Without a wand, he would be susceptible to attacks from others. Without a wand he would be unable to learn from Sir, though that might not be such a bad thing, and the crazy voice might have other ideas about what to do with his spare time. Without a wand, he would be unable to attempt to steal the Philosopher's Stone and give it to the centaur, finally freeing himself of all strings of debt.

"The second option is that I expel Jeremy and almost simultaneously find Harry Potter. You would be able to start again with a clean slate. No one would know of your wrong-doings and you would find yourself with few, if any, pupils aggressive towards you. You would be under close watch, certainly, from myself and other teachers but I believe this to be understandable under the circumstances."

If anything, this option only made him want to grimace more but still he found himself unable. If he were Harry Potter again, everyone, including Granger, would be constantly pestering him which was one

of the reasons he had not wanted to reveal himself on Halloween. He did not want to be the saviour of the wizarding world; the dark lord, whether he returned or not, was not his problem. Besides that, if people were attempting to be his friend, they could only get hurt through one manipulating person or another. Yes, by attacking the Weasley twins, he was keeping people safe from harm.

“The third and final option I have for you, Harry, is that you remove your gloves, tell me why you visited Sirius Black, a known murderer, in Azkaban and you agree to allow me to decide where you go during future holidays.”

Dumbledore sat back and without warning Harry's jaw dropped forcefully. It appeared he could move it again. Not one of the options was really appealing, far from it. The third option seemed slightly bizarre too. Why on earth would Dumbledore want him to remove his gloves so badly? Of course, he was aware it wasn't part of the uniform but surely it wasn't that important? Being forced to go where the manipulative coot wanted during the holidays was fairly easy to guess why it was wanted. Obviously Dumbledore did not want him to run away and vanish on him again. That left the matter of Sirius. Being the “greatest headmaster Hogwarts had ever seen”, Dumbledore should be able to surmise why he had gone to see Sirius. Wasn't it blatant that he had gone to tell him that he knew of his innocence?

“Ye already know why I wen' tae see Sirius though. How's tha' a punishment?” he asked after a few moments thought.

He was answered by a pensive look and “Then it should not be hard to remind me. What do you wish your punishment to be?”

All three options were rather bad but, he supposed, that was the point of a punishment. It wouldn't be wise for him to go wherever Dumbledore wanted during holidays and removing his gloves would lead to awkward questions. Nymph would probably kill him too if he didn't return for summer as well. Besides that, he missed his life before Hogwarts; it was so much better without all these *rules*. If he gave up his wand he would be open and defenceless to all attacks, something many in the school would no doubt take advantage of. He

would also have to prove himself *trustworthy* to get it back and with his current record, Harry was not sure he ever would. Neither did he have a particular wish to become known as Harry Potter to the wizarding world. Questions, bothersome people, stares and danger not only for himself lay in that path.

“Why am I decidin’?” he eventually asked when he had all but reached a decision. Why didn’t Dumbledore simply administer a punishment himself?

“I believe that this will be a good test of your character. I find you as much an enigma as ever and this shall allow me to see better where your priorities lie. Other than which, I would not be able to deal you all three punishments as it would be unfair to you, and could raise more than a few questions as to why I were punishing Harry Potter before he had even arrived at the school.”

Fair point. For the first time since Harry had met him or heard of him, the bearded madman was being reasonable, if you could call it that. That still left him with the decision of what his punishment was to be, however. Steeling himself, he hoped he was not making the wrong choice.

Harry got to his feet and placed his wand on the desk before Dumbledore.

For a fleeting instant he could have sworn a look of disappointment flashed across the man’s face though it was hard to tell without making eye contact. Harry had no wish to do that again any time soon.

“An interesting choice, my boy.” Harry twitched at the words again. Though he sincerely regretted his earlier outburst, nothing seemed to have come from it and he was not about to remind Dumbledore of the fact. “In time you may get your wand back, but for now, you may go. Oh and Harry?” he asked just as he had turned and almost reached the door. “It would be best if you let Madam Pomfrey take a look at that nasty bump on your head.”

Well that was a bit rich for him to call it a “nasty bump” considering he had been the one to deliver it but nevertheless Harry took his advice,

however reluctantly he did so, and traipsed up to the Hospital Wing, forgetting until it was too late that this was where the Weasley twins had been sent.

Madam Pomfrey had finished attending to the boys when Harry arrived but she was not far off, making notes on a clipboard. The twins were lying in beds beside each other and were still looking rather worse for the wear if cleaner. Their bodies were covered almost completely in bandages including their foreheads, their feet suspended by more bandages in the air, the needles still firmly speared through them, and their breathing was coming in rough uneven breaths. To make matters worse, Ron and Percy were sitting between the beds and glanced up as he came in.

“What are you doing here, White?” Ron immediately asked, glaring at him.

Harry returned the look in kind and with great effort to maintain a normal accent, which was hard considering the overwhelming urge to curse the boy, sneered “Not that it’s any of *your* business, but I’m here to see Madam Pomfrey.” There was no point in lying to him, not when there was no other reason he could be in the *Hospital* Wing.

Ron laughed and Percy merely looked at him like he was a piece of dirt on his shoe. “Get one of their own over on you, did they? Did ickle White get hurt by the nasty boys?” the younger of the two asked.

It took all the restraint Harry had not to pull his knife on him, without his wand as a weapon. “*Actually*, they didn’t lay a *finger* on me. They were too busy screaming. Your precious *Dumbledore* was the one who attacked me.” He was probably being careless with his words and they would certainly not help him prove himself trustworthy but he didn’t care. Ron annoyed him to no end and, to Harry’s delight, was somewhat dumbfounded and speechless.

“Nonesense.” Madam Pomfrey bustled over to him, finally done with her notes. “The headmaster would not attack a student.” Harry didn’t even bother to correct her; it would prove futile if he did. Instead he simply sent her a scathing look which she either ignored or missed. “What is the problem, Mr White?”

She directed him to a bed to sit on at the opposite side of the room after inspecting his head. The room certainly brought back memories. Coincidentally she had sent him to the same bed he had used on his first visit to the Hospital Wing. Then she bustled out of the room to get a potion.

“You can’t seriously be treating him after what he did to Fred and George, can you?” Ron called after her. Both Harry and Madam Pomfrey ignored him. “People like him don’t deserve to be treated.”

The nurse returned with a vial of purple potion and instructions to down it all. Looking at it sceptically, Harry asked, “Isn’t there another way? Other than potion, I mean.” So far potions had not been having a good effect on him. They appeared to be always giving him that more than unpleasant feeling of suffocation and then altering his appearance and he certainly did not want revert back to Harry Potter in front of Ron. His green highlighted hair that had somehow remained even after renewing his original appearance potion was bad enough.

“What’s wrong, White? Is little Whitey afraid of the nasty potion?” Ron cooed again, mockingly. “Scared of something? Why don’t you run home to your mummy? Oh that’s right, she hates you doesn’t she? Why else wouldn’t she want you home for Christmas? Or maybe you don’t *have* parents anymore; you probably killed them all. That’s what you do, isn’t it, White? Try and get rid of everyone you don’t like. Probably killed all your relatives too. Yeah, that makes sense; I can see it in your face. You got all your relatives killed and it was all your fault. All your worthless, *pathetic* – w-w-what are you d-doing?”

Ron had gone too far. A nerve had been more than touched within Harry when Ron had started insulting his parents and suggesting he *killed* them. *Ah, but it was your fault they died. If it wasn’t for you they’d still be alive*, a snide voice at the back of his mind told him. He pushed the thought away angrily. It wasn’t his fault. It was Dumbledore’s. Dumbledore was the one that had gotten them killed.

In his anger, Harry had dropped the vial of potion to the floor where it shattered, drawn a knife that had been strapped to his arm – an old habit – crossed the room in a few strides and was holding the knife

with its point pressed at Ron's throat. Percy and Madam Pomfrey had their wands out and were aiming them at him.

"If ye were worth a little more, *Weasel*, I migh' actually use this," Harry ground out, teeth clenched. "But ye're not. Ye know *nothin'* of me, *Weasel*, an' it would be in yer bes' interests if ye held yer tongue. Wha' I did tae yer *brothers* was jus' fer show; say *anythin'* to me ever again an' ah'll show ye wha' I can really do."

By this point Ron was paler than the walls of the Hospital Wing, his freckles standing out horribly. Lowering the knife Harry turned to walk out of the Wing. A little pain in his head was not worth it. He was stopped at the door, however, when Madam Pomfrey spoke.

"I'm afraid I will have to take that knife from you," she said albeit somewhat tentatively.

Glaring at her, Harry said, "Ah'd like tae see you try," and without further ado proceeded to storm away from the Wing.

The rest of the Christmas holidays passed relatively peacefully for Harry. Sir had not spoken to him since his punishment had been administered, most likely because he was in a bad mood with him, and the Weasley twins had still not been let out of the Hospital Wing. For this reason, the Gryffindor tower was usually very quiet as Ron and Percy spent most of their time foisting their *enjoyable* company upon the two. This did leave Harry with very little to do, however, and ended up spending most of his time reading books in the library on anything that came to mind. Occasionally he took trips into the forest despite the risk of not coming out and the fact that it was forbidden. It called to him as alluringly as it had his first time in the Hospital Wing and if it were up to him, he would probably spend more of his time there but Dumbledore would probably stick his meddling nose in it if he realised what Harry had been doing.

On Christmas day, he had been surprised, though not unpleasantly so, to find that Nymph had somehow sent him a present. He had sent her one too, of course; a holder for a dagger that he had transfigured that wouldn't let anyone but her remove the knife. Nymph had gotten him a pair of black lace-up boots (she had noticed that his were becoming increasingly worn and old). At the foot of Ron's bed, there was a small, though marginally bigger than Harry's, pile of his own wrapped presents. When the other boy awoke, he immediately delved into the pile and began tearing off paper, sending it flying left, right and centre, only pausing for a moment to glance at Harry who was sitting on the floor beside his bed reading his book on potions. For a moment it had looked like Ron was going to make some snide remark about his lack of presents (not that Harry minded it) but when he saw Harry's knife lying beside him, he shut his mouth with a snap and continued to ignore him.

The rest of the day had passed pretty much like any other for Harry. Ron and Percy spent the day celebrating with Fred and George who had finally awoken and so he was not disturbed by them. The great hall had been garishly decorated with twelve huge trees, tinsel and baubles. He had sneered up at Dumbledore and the few remaining teachers before eating his meagre dinner and leaving with another

sneer. There was no need to be polite now, he reasoned. Sir was not talking to him and thus could not threaten to not teach him and Harry felt that if he didn't express his dislike for the school and its inhabitants, he might explode.

All too soon the holidays were over and the rest of the castle's inhabitants were returning. It was on this day that the twins were being released from the hospital wing too, so Harry did not doubt that the whole school would soon enough know what he had done to them, as he had "ordered". Harry conveniently made himself scarce in the hidden room where he normally would have been learning spells.

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Fred and George sank into two stuffy armchairs in the common room with identical sighs. Percy and Ron were perched on the edges of their seats, tense, as if fearing that any moment they would collapse. An irritated look was all that it took for their brothers to slink back into their own armchairs.

"Where's White?" George asked, when no one spoke.

"Oh, you needn't worry about *him*," Percy replied, pompous as usual. "He never comes here during the day. Too right, if you ask me. Besides, I hardly think he will try attacking anyone again any time soon; Dumbledore would have him expelled."

Fred shared a glance with George. They knew this wasn't so. If they didn't tell the student body what had occurred down by the lake, they were sure White - no, *Harry Potter* - wouldn't hesitate to pull his wand on them. It was all a bit confusing for them, after all, why would *Harry Potter* want the whole school to know that he attacked them? Why would he want to remain disguised, for that matter? The way he had looked at them, spoke to them, it had been so cold, so *evil*. He was the saviour of the wizarding world but then, how could he have done that to them? It was almost as if he wanted you-know-who's position for himself.

"What did Dumbledore do to punish him?" asked Fred.

"Dunno, but it can't have been light. He hasn't pulled his wand on anyone since," Ron said, shrugging dismissively. "What exactly happened down there, anyway? I mean, why'd he do it?"

To be perfectly honest, the entire affair was a tad blurry to the twins. They recalled the spells he had cast perfectly; the pain in their feet whenever they walked reminded the twins of them. Afterwards, however, when they had flickered into consciousness at the sound of Potter's howler, was all a bit vague. They recalled hearing Ron's voice; that had been why they screamed. They had been sure Ron would get help and he did. Vaguely they remembered Dumbledore, being angrier than they had ever seen him, throwing him against a tree after he had kicked them for calling him Harry Potter, in a strange accent that they had never heard from him before even when he had been trying to curse them into oblivion. Apparently he wished his true identity to remain hidden.

"We'll tell you later," Fred answered before George took over.

"We don't want to have to tell it too many times."

Right on cue, the portrait guarding the entrance to the tower swung open and admitted the rest of the Gryffindor pupils. It would seem that the Hogwarts Express had been early and they were returning to spend some time in the common room before going to the welcome back feast. The students poured in, clambering for the best seats, and were talking animatedly. It was only when the last pupil, their friend Lee Jordan, entered did anyone notice the bandages that the twins still wore.

"What happened to you?" he asked in surprise.

"White did," Ron growled. Immediately the entire common room fell silent and all attention swung to them.

Without further ado, they told their tale of what had happened. How they had followed White to find out where he always went (they did not think that he would appreciate it if they told the entire common room that they had been trying to prove that he was Harry Potter), how he had confronted them through their disillusionment charms right up to hearing his howler (though they claimed they could not

hear any definite details) and Dumbledore being incredibly angry with him.

At the end of their tale, the common room erupted into angry mutters about him. Most were fearful though. Obviously they had thought that the incident when Ron had been dunked in the lake was the worst he could do. How wrong they were.

Fred and George were not really sure what to do about Potter now. Sure they were intimidated by him, maybe even a little scared, but they could not find themselves hating the boy that had defeated the Dark Lord. Who could? Sure everyone around them hated him, but they didn't know who he truly was. They would not run scared at the sight of him (and not just because they were currently incapable of running), no, if he was on the path to being a dark lord himself, they would try and stop him. As crazy as it sounded, even to them, they wanted to befriend the boy who had almost killed them.

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Harry had lost track of time in his reading and thus was slightly late going down to the great hall for the welcome back feast. He arrived just as the last few students were taking their places at their house tables and at his appearance in the doorway, a great hush fell over the hall and every eye turned to look at him, some in fear, some in hatred, some passive but most glaring. He returned their looks in kind with a glare of his own. "What're you lookin' at?"

He took a seat at the very end of the Gryffindor table, closest to the door and furthest away from the teachers' table and the pupils sitting nearest him scuttled away as much as they could. Murmurs replaced the hush, no doubt about him. Vaguely he wondered how the Weasley twins had managed to tell everyone so quickly. Harry knew that he was slipping, and that a little of his real accent was sliding through his facade but, though he tried to hide it, he found that he couldn't really be bothered doing too great a job of it. What difference did it really make now, anyway? The people who might have guessed who he was from it already knew. He doubted any of the teachers other than the four who knew would be able to even guess at who he really was.

The low murmurs circulating about him quietened again when Dumbledore rose gracefully to his feet. "Welcome back to a new term at Hogwarts!" he announced as if this were the most important thing in the world. "I hope you all had a very merry Christmas; I know we at Hogwarts did." Harry snorted and, at the other end of the table, he thought the Weasley twins did the same. "I am sure many of you have noticed that two of our members have injured themselves and I ask you not to pester them about it if they do now wish to answer questions."

This time he sneered; it was a bit late now to tell them not to ask questions after they all knew. Apparently they thought so too as they were rolling their eyes. Someone at one of the other tables even went as far as to shout, "We have a right to know if we might be attacked!" And of course this set off other similar shouts. Dumbledore didn't appear to be doing anything to stop them either, as mob mentality took over.

"Say tha' to my face!" Somehow he found himself on his feet, the goblet he had been *calmly* drinking out of thrust to the ground in anger. Somewhere amid the throng of shouts he had heard one that had stated that he had only attacked the Weasley twins for pleasure and for some reason it had struck a nerve. He really was getting rather testy these days. When Harry realized that the hall had fallen silent again and that no one knew to which shout he was referring to, he decided to give up on the hopes of eating his dinner, no matter how little he ate, in peace. Since he was unable to tell who exactly had shouted the particular comment, he settled for merely voicing his thoughts in general. "Ye're all *pathetic*, you know that? Can't even say something to me face. Cowards, every last one of ye. I *hate* you people. I *hate* this school an' I *hate* you," The very last comment directed at Dumbledore and Harry was sure that he knew it even if no one else did.

Muttering angrily to himself, Harry stormed out of the great hall, paying no heed to the chatter that immediately sprung up in his wake or the small fire that appeared to have begun burning spontaneously at the Gryffindor table. He swept through the long corridors of the castle paying no real mind to where he was headed. Why hadn't Dumbledore tried to stop the murmurs or shouts? Much as he hated

the man, Harry knew that he did have a certain sway over the students and that if he had asked for quiet they would have been tripping over each other to obey. So why hadn't he? The crazy old man probably thought that he would become ashamed by the shouts and amend his ways. Crazy was definitely the best word to describe him.

Sometimes Harry found himself wondering why he had ever come to the prison that was Hogwarts. He didn't like the school, the students or the teachers and no one certainly liked him. He needed to learn magic, he knew that. How would he take revenge on Dumbledore for all that he had done if he couldn't even cast a simple spell? Still, perhaps there was another school he could go to. Not in Britain certainly; he'd have heard if there were another school besides Hogwarts but there had to be schools abroad. Where else would all the foreign witches and wizards be educated in magic? There were none at Hogwarts. No, he wouldn't be able to go to one of them. There would be a language barrier for one and Dumbledore would be sure to hunt him down and no doubt wreak havoc on wherever he decided to inhabit. Harry would not put more people in danger than was necessary. And there was that horse-guy, Jacques, and that infernal debt Harry owed him.

His wandering halted when he realized where he was. The corridor was dusty and particularly old looking. None of the torches were lit casting a deep shadow over every suit of armor and stone statue. There were no windows or portraits in this corridor. It was the forbidden one on the third floor.

Annoyed with himself, Harry turned on heel and strode away from the corridor. There was no point in being there *now*. Perhaps if he still had his wand he might have considered just going for it and getting the Philosopher's Stone, but now that his wand had been confiscated and he was defenseless, it didn't really seem that sensible to walk in on a three-headed dog. Absent mindedly, he wondered how he would get the stone now. He was so lost in his thoughts that he didn't notice the dark figure walking around the same corner as he until he had walked right into him.

“Oomph!” Harry glanced up at the figure and saw, to his surprise, that it was Snape.

“Well, well, *Potter*, not breaking rules *again*? Ten points from Gryffindor.” Snape was looming over him now with contempt plainly written on his face.

“Ah’m sorry; I didn’ realize walkin’ in the corridors was a *crime*. Well ah’ll be sure not tae do *that* again,” replied Harry with equal contempt, sarcasm oozing off his tongue. Snape always annoyed him to no end.

Snape’s hand twitched as if wishing it could go for his wand. “After that, *courageous*, scene you pulled at the feast, I find it hard to believe you would loiter so close to the forbidden corridor without a reason. Five points from Gryffindor for your cheek. You are just as arrogant as your pathetic father.”

“At leas’ ah”m not a greasy, snot nosed, overgrown bat of a professor who has tae pick on *children* tae make himself feel big jus’ because – argh!” Harry’s tirade, which in his opinion was pleasant considering some of the things he was thinking at that moment about his “professor”, was cut short when the overgrown bat in question drew his wand and sent him flying into the wall behind him. Black dots swam before his eyes as pain shot through his body.

“Learn to pick your battles, *Potter*. Like I said, just like your good-for-nothing father. As for me, you know *nothing* of me.” Now he was livid it appeared. Interesting.

Struggling not to pass out, Harry, being the stubborn person that he was, replied, “Ah’ll get ye for tha’ one, Snivellus.”

“Oh really,” Snapes condescending tone cut through his pounding head like a knife. “And how would you be doing that? I highly doubt that you will go to Dumbledore given your *great* relationship with the headmaster.”

“Ye’ll see.” The greasy haired potions”master” took that as his cue and left Harry, in pain, still slumped against the wall. And he would get him back, too. The only question was how. Obviously he would

need his wand. It was increasingly difficult to take revenge without the aid of his wand.

“If you put these stupid notions of right and wrong aside, boy, I will teach you wandless magic. That would aid you greatly, would it not? Besides, you cannot carry on as defenseless as you are. Think carefully. Remember though, the enemy of your enemy is your ally.”

Harry thought over that. Sir did have a point, much as he loath to admit it. Sooner or later word would get out that he did not have access to his wand and when that time came he was sure that there were many students who would not mind taking advantage of the situation and attacking him. Sure Sir might be just as bad as Dumbledore in some ways, but maybe Harry could tolerate him. At least until he had fulfilled his purpose. His mind made up, he replied with a simple, “Okay,” and that left him with only one question in his mind.

Why was Snape at the third floor corridor when everyone else was at the feast?

Finding himself in considerable pain and with very little energy with which to move himself, Harry simply stumbled his way to the hidden room in which he practised magic before collapsing to the ground and passing out from exhaustion. True, he could have gone to the Gryffindor Tower or the Hospital Wing but not only would it be hard to avoid awkward questions, it would also leave him open for attack by anyone who bore a grudge against him and these days there was certainly a lot of them. There was no point trying to tell anyone about Snape. The overgrown bat had a point when he had said Harry would not go to Dumbledore; the old coot wouldn't do anything anyway. His fellow students wouldn't care what Snape did to him – they would only be envious that he had gotten there first. He could tell another teacher, he had mused before collapsing, but what could they do? Most likely they wouldn't even believe him. No, it was better that he extract his own revenge on Snape without others meddling.

What had the bat been doing clearly heading in the direction of the third floor corridor (while everyone else was conveniently distracted with the feast) anyway? The *forbidden* third floor corridor. For certain he hadn't been going to give Harry a moral boosting chat; it had been pure chance that they had met. So what had he been doing? It seemed improbable to Harry that he had been planning on stealing the stone. Besides the obvious attraction of turning objects to gold and producing the elixir of life, the stone had no use for him. Dumbledore would know if he had stolen it and would get it back. *Unless he knew Harry had to steal the stone.*

The thought was chilling. If Snape knew that he wanted the stone, for whatever reason, he would surely tell Dumbledore. But if that were the case he would have done so already. He hadn't. Maybe he had no proof, maybe Dumbledore would not believe him, just as he had not believed Snape when he had informed him that "White" was Harry Potter, or maybe, *maybe*, Snape wanted the glory for stopping him single handedly. The thought that Snape knew he wanted the stone seemed more and more probable and likely with every second lingered on it. Whatever the reason, Snape was sure to be a thorn in his side.

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When Harry awoke in the Room, as he had so brilliantly christened it, it took him a moment to blink away the disorientation that he felt. After it had gone he felt only pain and stiffness in his limbs and muscles. It seemed like everywhere hurt: his head, his arm (his real one, that is), his legs, everywhere. With a groan he sat up and leaned his back against the wall.

“Luckily for you, Snape’s blast created a cut to the back of your head which had not yet begun to heal.” Sir sounded decidedly smug.

Harry reached up to feel the back of his scalp and found that there was indeed a large cut there. “Ah’m gonna kill that – wait, what d’you mean “luckily”?” Not in his wildest thoughts could he see how an injury to the back of the head was in any way fortunate.

“Now I won’t have to injure you myself.”

“Erm...” If Sir had a physical body that Harry could stare at incredulously he would have been. He settled for the wall instead. “What?” he finally asked when he decided that he could not fathom the reasoning behind this without assistance.

“I intend to begin your lessons on wandless magic today. If you are to learn under me – again – then you will work hard and follow my advice without question. I believe that the best place to start would be healing as it is perhaps the most beneficial to your situation. Whilst defence is advisable to learn, you cannot possibly block every single spell made against your person and eventually you will let one slid by your defences. When this occurs, if you can heal yourself quickly it is of no consequence. If you cannot heal yourself quickly, however, then one simple spell can be your undoing.”

“Why didn’ ye say tha’ in the first place?” Really, there had been no need for the confusion, especially this early in the morning. At least, Harry assumed it was early morning. In a room with no windows and artificial light it was rather hard to tell.

"I rather thought it was obvious, impudent boy. If simple things like that escape your comprehension then I wonder that I teach you at all."

If that was obvious, Harry would hate to see subtle. "Why am I learnin' tae heal on myself?" If he were learning to heal on some other party (like Weasel's rat), then if anything went wrong it wouldn't matter because even if he failed to rectify the mistake, there would be someone else who could. If he learnt to heal on himself, however, he might be rendered incapable of fixing a mistake or finding someone who could. Harry voiced these thoughts.

"Well you had best not make a mistake then, hadn't you?" Well that was that then. Harry sighed. And Sir thought *he* was reckless and unthinking. *"Do you know why a wand is of assistance when casting spells?"*

"Erm, because they're special?" Harry asked, maybe a *bit* too hopefully. To be honest he had no clue. Who did? Evidently Sir.

The voice that occupied the space that was his head, sighed. *"Make yourself comfortable, boy, this could take some time for you to comprehend."*

"A wand, in itself, is not capable of casting magical spells. It is simply a tool. If a muggle were to pick up a wand, nothing would happen. I know better than to ask you why this is. When a wizard or witch casts a spell the magic does not come from within them. Magic does not reside within a human being, wizarding or not. Wizards simply channel magic from the earth's core. Their strength depends solely on how much magic they are capable of channelling."

"Wands aid this process by creating a link between the earth and the wizard making it easier to channel magic with less effort. Several millennia ago, wizards did not use wands but since then they have grown lazy. Without having to establish the link between the earth's magic and themselves, wizard's found it easier to channel more magic even if it still required considerable effort to channel to their full potential. The wand has two key components; I don't suppose you could tell me what they are?"

“You suppose correctly.”

“I thought as much. The wand’s key components are the wood and the core. The wood is especially beneficial to creating the link between the earth and wizard because, surprisingly enough, it comes from trees which are plants of and in the earth. The particular wood in a wand is related to a wizard in many ways such as the length being directly proportional to the height of the wizard but I shall not bore you with each and every relation.

“The core, too, is related to the wizard though again I shall not go into detail which I do not think would be relevant to this lesson. The core’s main function, being from a magical creature or object, is to direct the connection with the earth to magic. It’s as simple as that.

“Without a wand doing this for you, you will have to create a link to the earth’s magic on your own which requires considerable focus and determination. This is why wandless magic is so much more difficult than spells with a wand.”

Most of what Sir had just related to Harry seemed utterly pointless and overcomplicated. Wouldn’t it have been easier to just tell him that wands made a connection to the earth’s magic that wizard’s channelled from, and that without one he would have to make the connection on his own? Really Sir did tend to ramble when he became enthused in a topic. He had almost interrupted Sir (which would not have gone down well) several times when he thought he was going to go into detail about relations but thankfully he hadn’t needed to. Harry had probably just wasted several moments of his life by just listening to him. In a moment of particular daring, Harry voiced his thoughts. Sir responded with a sting of magic that felt suspiciously like a slap upside the head.

What had he gotten himself into? Again.

xXxXxX

Surprisingly, despite the long-winded explanation that followed on *how* to do it, Harry managed to channel some magic wandlessly after only thirty-two attempts; Sir had counted. He was just feeling proud of himself as it obviously meant he had good focus and determination

when Sir had burst his bubble as he remembered his wooden arm. He had then claimed that the arm made the connection to the earth almost entirely for him and that it was not difficult to then direct the connection to magic when he was residing inside one of the most magical places in Britain, Hogwarts Castle. Harry had then been told this was cheating and that they would never know how much he was able to do wandlessly because of it. Nevertheless, Harry still felt somewhat proud of his achievement to clot the blood around his cut. That was all that he had been able to do but Sir assured him that this was indeed very impressive (or would have been without the added assistance), especially for one so young.

Harry had gone down to breakfast, his weariness and cause for it forgotten, in a decidedly cheerful mood. When he had seen the faces at the Gryffindor table, however, he had faltered, his mood wavering. Every face present at the table was glaring at him along with many from the other tables. Deciding to ignore them, Harry tried not to let their hostile stares and speculative mutters bother him but soon he became fed up with them and stormed out of the Great Hall after eating his meagre breakfast. He would have thought that he would regain a normal appetite with so much food constantly on offer to him but apparently not. Old habits died hard.

The Weasley twins had not been present in the Great Hall, for which Harry was glad. He was not sure he would be able to look them in the eye or endure their constant stares with them knowing who he was. It was one of Granger's factors that always made being around her uncomfortable as well as irritating.

Slowly Harry made his way down to the dungeons for double potions with the Slytherins. There was lots of time for him to get there, having cut breakfast short, and there wasn't a chance in hell that he was going to be early for one of *Snape's* lessons. Five minutes to go and Harry was still a couple of corridors away. He was just idly wondering how Snape would look with a goatee when a hand grabbed him from behind, covering his mouth, and yanked him into a hidden alcove.

In a flash he had freed himself from the hand, flicked his knife to his own and spun around, fully prepared to dodge should any spells come his way.

“Jumpy, White?” drawled Malfoy with a raised eyebrow towards the knife that was pointing at him threateningly. It was just Malfoy. Harry lowered the knife but did not put it away. It was always better to be prepared, just in case.

“You would be too,” he replied, cautiously. It seemed a little suspicious that a supposedly “evil” Slytherin would arrange so *efficiently* to meet him where there were no witnesses. No one to hear pleas for help. Not that Harry would ever plea for help of course - he was perfectly able to take care of himself – but that could have been Malfoy’s intention. “What d’you want?”

“You know, White, after that incident on Halloween, I didn’t think you had it in you,” Malfoy continued to drawl, ignoring the question completely. “I thought you’d gone soft. You’re just so *full* of surprises. First you put Weasel in a coma – a tribute to society if you ask me – “ Harry was tempted to point that no one *had* asked him, but decided to let him continue to see where he was going. “But then you saved that *Granger* girl from that troll instead of letting her get smashed to pieces, which really *would* have been an improvement, and now, *now* you take on both the Weasley twins single handedly and not only disarm them, oh no, you beat them to a pulp!”

Malfoy stopped talking and simply looked at Harry as if gauging his reaction to his own deeds. Silence fell between them. “Do you have a point?” he asked at last when it appeared that Malfoy was, indeed, just going to stand there.

“I was just musing, White, that you might have the right idea. You’ve been giving that Weasley family what they deserved all along. It’s disgraceful; a pureblooded family sympathising with the other sort and with no money to speak of. I’m willing to accept that troll incident as a mere oversight on your part. A mistake, if you will.”

Again he fell silent. “Seriously, are ye goin’ somewhere with this? Some of us have potions that started abou’... five minutes ago, now.”

“My *point*, White, is that my offer still stands. You need allies. Even you must see that. Especially now.”

Especially now? What was so important now that wasn't before? Maybe Malfoy meant now that everyone hated him so much... but hadn't they felt a certain animosity towards him for some time now? Perhaps he meant now that everyone knew what "he" was capable of. "What d'you mean "especially now"? What's so special about now?"

The blonde haired boy smirked. "Now that you no longer have access to your wand, of course. Dumbledore so very helpfully announced it after you left the feast," he added after seeing Harry's surprised look.

If everyone knew that he was "defenceless" then it wouldn't be long before someone with less peaceful intentions than Malfoy found him alone. With his great progress, or lack thereof, in wandless magic, he would have to be extra careful where he went. No doubt Weasley in particular would be attempting to take advantage of the situation, most likely before the day was out.

That only left one thing for Harry to think about. Should he take Malfoy's offer? Sure Malfoy would be in danger from Dumbledore but the way he acted he already was and if he wasn't, soon would be. It would be awkward, yes, not least because they were in two rival houses. Malfoy believed that only wizards with all wizard blood were really important and Harry didn't agree with that at all. After all, his mother was muggleborn and he had lived in the muggle world for most of his short life and found nothing wrong with non-magical people.

"Remember what I told you." And of course Sir would decide to add his input into the confusion with another ridiculous comment. Sir said many things; how on earth was Harry supposed to pinpoint the exact occasion he meant? As if reading his thoughts, Sir quoted himself. *"The enemy of your enemy is your ally."*

True, Malfoy was certainly the enemy of his enemy but what if the enemy of his enemy was also his enemy? That would be a triangle of enemies right there, which was rather excessive.

"Why d'you want to be "allies" anyway?"

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "You know for a smart guy, you're pretty ignorant sometimes. Think on it, White. *You're a powerful ally. I'm a*

powerful ally. Think of the things we can both do when we're separate. Think of the things we could do if we were united."

So that was it, was it? Power. He should have thought of that. It was always power with these wizarding people. Either way, Harry could not reach a definite decision. Besides, Snape was probably getting annoyed. "Ah'll think on it."

Smirking, as if this in itself were some great achievement, Malfoy replied smoothly, "Do that, but do not keep me waiting too long, White. I am anxious for a decision."

Harry nodded and the two set off for the potions classroom, now sufficiently late that Snape would be twitching in annoyance. Indeed when they entered the classroom, drawing the attention of every other person in the room who were all chopping ingredients fervently (or hacking in Longbottom's case), Snape was livid.

"Detention, White!" He barked immediately, not even waiting for an explanation that Harry had yet to come up with. He frowned. Detention? What about the agreement with Dumbledore? Or maybe Snape felt he was able to break it since Harry had done the same, willingly or not.

"Ah thought ah wasn' getting detention," he pointed out rudely anyway.

"You thought wrong. Take your seats!" And of course Snape would very nicely ignore the fact that one of his own Slytherins had also come in late. Surprisingly Malfoy pointed this out.

"You haven't given me detention." Harry was not the only one confused by this. All over the room were faint gasps and frowns. Even Snape was surprised enough for his angry sneer to melt into a look of surprise.

"I had assumed, Mister Malfoy, that you would have a good reason for your absence."

"I was talking to White, sir." Harry's frown deepened. What was Malfoy playing at? Not only was he talking back to *Snape* - which,

though slightly less sincere for a Slytherin than any other house, was still almost like signing your own death warrant – he was *asking* for a detention? Malfoy always did things for a reason (most of the time for an advantage) but even Snape appeared to be at a loss for what this was.

Being incapable of not giving him a detention now, Snape had to acquiesce, albeit reluctantly. “Detention for you too then, Mister Malfoy. Well,” he addressed the rest of the class who were staring in wonder. “What are you all looking around for? Back to your potions!”

Chapter Thirty-Seven (Caw, it's getting long)

By Loony

The detention Harry ended up serving was, remarkably, to be held in the forbidden forest. Not that he had any particular qualms about entering the forest, only the possibility that the forest would not allow him to leave again. It did make him wonder slightly if this had been Snape's intention. To his dismay, it was not only he and Malfoy (though he could still not quite work out why the blonde had demanded the detention) who would be punished in this manner. The Weasley twins were also serving a detention after letting off a dungbomb in celebration for regaining the use of their feet properly.

And so it was with a depressant atmosphere that the four boys were led down the front lawn on Hogwarts, to serve their detentions earned for whatever reason, by the caretaker Argus Filch. The last few rays of the sun were shrinking behind the horizon but there was still light from the stars and – Harry gulped when he saw it – full moon. It was not that he had anything against werewolves per se, but it *had* been in the forbidden forest that he had been attacked by a rabid wolf (or had it been a werewolf?) and lost his arm. He fingered it subconsciously through his robes.

Hagrid met them with his large boarhound Fang and a crossbow on the outskirts of the forest and took over from Filch, dismissing him with a wave. "I'll be back at dawn for what's left of them," Filch said nastily, and he turned and started back towards the castle, his lamp bobbing away in the darkness.

"I'm not going into the forest," Malfoy said and Harry was surprised to hear that there was a hint of panic in his voice. He glanced at the Weasley twins and was even more surprised to see that there was fear written on their faces too.

"Yeh are if yeh want ter stay at Hogwarts," Hagrid said fiercely. "Yeh've done wrong an' now yeh've got ter pay fer it."

"But *Hagrid*," whined Fred – or was it George? "Wasn't it in the forest that Harry Potter –" The twins both glanced at Harry, almost fearfully he was gleeful to see.

“- Was killed by a werewolf?” finished the other twin. There was that word “werewolf” again. Maybe it *had* been a werewolf that attacked him rather than a normal wolf. The thought made Harry even more thankful towards Jacques for amputating his arm and replacing it with a wooden one; it had most likely stopped him from becoming a werewolf himself.

“Yes, well,” Hagrid said uncomfortably. “We don’ know that he actually *died* in here, only that he were injured summat bad. From what we could tell, he’da lived if he found help quickly. We only found some blood an’ a couple o’ fingers, nothin’ life threatenin’ an’ no body.” The twins shared a puzzled look then glanced at Harry again. Malfoy was looking ready to flee.

“How d’you know he’s not a werewolf then? It’d take some real quick action or the *Dark Arts* to stop him bein’ one,” Harry said snidely, well aware of the effect this would have. As he had expected everyone present turned to stare at him, the Weasleys half-fearful, half-curious, Hagrid sternly and Malfoy calculatingly. Inside he was laughing hysterically.

“Enough o’ that,” Hagrid said as sternly as his stare. “We don’ know nothin’ abou’ it so there’d be no point worryin’ over it. We got a task ter do so listen carefully ‘cause it’s dangerous what we’re gonna do tonight an’ I don’ want no one takin’ risks. Follow me over here a moment.”

He led them to the very edge of the forest. Holding his lamp up high he pointed down a narrow, winding earth track that disappeared into the thick black trees. A light breeze lifted their hair as they looked into the forest.

“Look there,” said Hagrid. “See that stuff shinin’ on the ground? Silvery stuff? That’s unicorn blood. There’s a unicorn in here bin hurt badly by summat. This is the second time in a week. I found one dead last Wednesday. We’re gonna try an’ find the poor thing. We might have ter put it out of its misery.”

“And what if whatever hurt the unicorn finds us first?” asked Malfoy, unable to keep the fear out of his voice.

“There’s nothin’ that lives in the forest that’ll hurt yeh if yer with me or Fang,” said Hagrid. “An’ keep ter the path. Right, now we’re gonna split inter two parties an’ follow the trail in diff’rent directions. There’s blood all over the place; it must’ve bin staggerin’ around since last night at least.”

“I want Fang,” Malfoy said quickly, looking at Fang’s long teeth.

“All right but I warn yeh, he’s a coward. So Draco, Fang an’...” Hagrid looked at the other three. “Fred’ll go one way. No, there’s no use complainin’ abou’ it, George. The two of yeh’ll probably cause more trouble if yer together. Me, Jeremy an’ George’ll go the other way. Now, if any of us finds the unicorn, we’ll send up green sparks, right? An’ if anyone gets in trouble, send up red sparks an’ we’ll all come an’ find yeh – so be careful.”

“I’ll be needin’ me wand, then,” Harry said, fighting to keep a grin off his face. So far he had not had a class that required him to use his wand and so had not been reunited with it since he had given it to Dumbledore. He was desperate to feel it between his fingers again; he couldn’t explain it but his wand gave him a sense of completeness. Amazingly, no one had taken advantage of the situation yet, although he thought Ron had been about to try but McGonagall had happened to walk along the corridor at that precise moment.

“Yer, Professor Dumbledore told me. Here yeh go then, but I’ve also bin told ter tell yeh that yer not to do *anything* yer not supposed to with it or yeh’ll not be gettin’ it back again.” Hagrid held out his wand and he took it with a small smile.

“We goin’ then?” he asked eagerly. Still there was that pull of the forest and he was keen to enter its trees again, to feel the peace that always accompanied him when he was in there. The forest felt more like his home than anywhere else since his aunt had died.

The forest was black and silent, as always. Just before the sky was blocked completely from view by the thick hanging of branches and leaves, Harry said, “Oooh, look! A full moon!” And he had to struggle hard to keep himself from bursting out in laughter at the sight of Malfoy and the Weasley twins’ terrified faces. The Weasley twins

looked fearfully at him and relaxed only slightly when he did not turn into a werewolf before their eyes.

The path split into two and the groups separated. Harry wasn't bothered though; the forest always – well *nearly* always – had a calming effect on him. Apparently he was the only one, however. Hagrid was looking very worried and George even more so. He dropped behind the other two a little, not wishing to have to endure their company too much. Being around the Weasley twins made him distinctly uneasy. Every time he looked at one of them he kept seeing their faces, charred and burned, blood oozing from their bodies and needles protruding out of their feet. It was not a nice reminder of what he had done but had no control over.

Every now and then a sliver of moonlight evaded the branches above and illuminated a patch of the silver unicorn blood. What had been harming the unicorns? He had read about them briefly under Sir's orders and knew that they powerful – incredibly fast – creatures. It was not easy to harm one and only someone who had nothing to lose would do so. The blood of a unicorn could keep you alive if you were an inch from death but slaying something pure and defenceless to save yourself would give you only half a life, a cursed one at that, from the moment the blood touched your lips. Harry hoped that it was a creature that was hurting the unicorns and not a person. You would have to be even more twisted and desperate than Sir to hurt one.

It had only been five minutes since the two groups had parted ways when a red beam of light was shot into the air. Though this was not the intended signal as sparks were, Hagrid set off towards the place it had come from at a run, only pausing briefly to order them not to move.

“Do you think their okay?” George asked worriedly. Evidently he was worried about his brother rather than Malfoy.

Harry frowned at him. Why was he asking him? “Why should I care?” he asked coldly. George looked at him in surprise then seemed to remember who he was and turned away. A few minutes of silenced passed and still Hagrid had not returned.

"You're... *not* a werewolf, are you?" Weasley twin number one asked tentatively. Harry snorted derisively.

"Do I *look* like I'm a werewolf?"

"I s'pose not..." Silence fell between the two again. "Me and Fred, well, we want you to know, we understand why you did it and, well, we have no hard feelings."

A very coherent thought came to Harry at that exact moment in time. What the hell? "And *why* exactly is it tha' ah did it?" This would be interesting. There was not a chance in hell or earth that the Weasel twits knew the *real* reason why he had attacked them but nevertheless it might be entertaining to find out why they thought he had done it.

"Because – because you couldn't risk us finding out who you were... right?" Now there was an even bigger tone of uncertainty in his voice.

Harry laughed coldly, but only for show. If the Weasleys wanted to "patch things up" with him, as it were, they would be put into considerable danger if he let them. Dumbledore would no doubt try and manipulate them to get to him and probably wouldn't be beyond putting them in danger if he felt like it, not that they weren't already in danger of that. Not to mention that crazy Dark Lord guy that had killed his parents. And then there was Sir. Who *knew* what he would do if he were friends with them. Heck, if he was friends with them even Malfoy would probably try and attack them. It was for the best that they hated him... wasn't it?

"You understand *nothing*. Ye think ah'd go tae all that trouble to keep ye from findin' out? There are much, much easier ways tae do it," he tried to keep his voice as harsh as he could and the result was quite good. Before Weasley could reply, however, Hagrid reappeared, fuming, with Malfoy and Weasley twin number two in toll.

Malfoy, it seemed, had attacked Weasley from behind to scare him but Weasley twin number two had responded in kind. The beam of red they had seen had apparently been a stray spell. Neither had been seriously injured fortunately – or was that unfortunately? Harry couldn't decide.

“We’ll be lucky ter catch anythin’ now, with the racket you two were makin’. Right, we’re changin’ groups – the twins’ll come with me; I don’ trust ye two on yer own. Jeremy, you an’ Fang go with this idiot.”

So Harry set off with Malfoy and Fang in the opposite direction from Hagrid and the twins but as soon as they were out of sight he halted Malfoy. “Hang on a second.” He then proceeded to howl like a wolf. From further up the path he heard the frightened yelps of the Weasel twits. Chuckling he continued on their designated path.

“What was that for?” asked Malfoy, his eyebrow raised.

“Tae freak them out.” Malfoy seemed more at ease now than when they had been entering the forest and would not, it appeared, be content to walk in silence.

“Why did you say those things about Harry Potter? Surely you don’t really think the wonder boy would use the Dark Arts.”

What was it with people and asking strange questions in a dark forest late at night? Was it simply a strange question provoking atmosphere? Or maybe it was something in the water...

“Well why not? It’s possible, init? No one knows what happened to him, do they? Besides that, it annoyed those Weasel twits even more.” Malfoy’s wand was not creating very much light, so Harry lit his own and couldn’t help but wonder at how easy it was to cast the spell compared to his attempts at wandless magic.

“I’m sure. Have you thought any more about my –“ He fell silent, gaping ahead. Harry turned to look at what had surprised him so much that he was speechless.

Something bright white was gleaming on the ground. It was the unicorn and it was dead. Along the path there had been splashes of blood on the roots of the trees that had gradually gotten thicker. It seemed the creature had been thrashing around in pain. Its long slender legs were stuck out at odd angles where it had fallen and its mane was spread pearly white on the dark leaves. It was oddly spellbinding.

He had taken one step towards it when a slithering sound made him freeze where he stood. A bush on the edge of the clearing quivered and out of the shadows a hooded figure came crawling across the ground like some stalking beast. Harry, Malfoy and Fang stood transfixed. The cloaked figure reached the unicorn, lowered its head over the wound in the animal's side and began to drink its blood.

Malfoy let out a terrible scream and bolted, Fang already leading the way. *Cowards*, Harry couldn't help but think despite the urge to do so himself but he was frozen where he stood. The cloaked figure lifted its head and looked straight at Harry, unicorn blood dribbling down its front. It got to its feet and began to move towards him.

"Do not flee." Well that was all very well for *Sir* to say. He wasn't the one being advanced upon by a crazy thing in a hood. Without warning, his scar burst into pain like he had never felt from it before. It felt like his forehead was on fire. He refused to fall to his knees despite the blinding pain but he screwed up his eyes in an effort to bear it. When at last it passed and he opened his eyes the figure was gone and a centaur was standing in its place.

It was not Jacques, however. This one had a less *golden* appearance and was younger. He had white-gold hair and a palomino body. The centaur had astonishingly blue eyes, like pale sapphires. "The forest is not safe at this time," he said.

"Really?" Harry replied, sarcasm oozing off his tongue. Did the centaur really think he was that naïve? If it wasn't enough to see a *thing* drinking unicorn blood and then have it advancing on him, he had to have a patronizing centaur speak to him. But Harry saw an opportunity here, and was willing to use it. "What do ye know of Jacques? Of the southern forest," he added as he remembered what the first centaur had told him when they met.

"Of the southern forest?" the centaur asked incredulously. "In this forest we do not separate ourselves in different herds. In other forests, yes, but no longer in this one. Other than that, no centaur would ever have the audacity to be named Jacques."

Erm... what? Had the first centaur he had met lied to him then? "Why not?"

“Jacques the centaur is a centaur long passed. He was famous for meddling against the stars. He was exiled for it. How is it that you know of him?”

Harry thought quickly. Obviously something was going on with the first centaur he had met, and he would rather not reveal too much until he knew what it was. “Just something I heard once.”

Had the centaur lied to him? Had he given him a false name in order to hide the fact that he had helped him from other centaurs? Perhaps... Harry was sure he had not imagined the great beast with which he had conversed with *twice*. His arm was proof of that. How else would he have gotten it and been defended against the werewolf? Or maybe the centaur hadn't wanted Harry to know who he was. No matter what the creatures reason, he still left him with one question. Who was the centaur?

Hagrid appeared, puffing, with the other three boys in tow. He immediately began to inspect the unicorn, shaking his head and muttering. The group made their way back to the castle in silence.

Later that night, when he was alone in the Room, Harry asked Sir why he had instructed him not to flee.

“If it had come to it, I would have defended you against the cloaked one. The cloaked one thinks he is powerful, but he is nothing compared to me.”

Harry had tried to glean more information from Sir that might lead to clues as to his identity but his attempts had been futile. In the end, he accepted that he wouldn't be finding out any time soon and let it rest - though he did have more questions than answers *again*. One such question was who was Jacques? If he wasn't, well, Jacques, the kind centaur who had helped a boy being attacked by a werewolf, then was he merely the centaur who felt need to lie to cover up any good act? Or maybe it was deeper than that. Maybe Jacques (Harry would always refer to him as such unless he found out his real identity) hid the fact that he helped him because others in his herd would exile him for "going against the stars". Or maybe he hid his real identity because he did not want it to be known that he was making deals and requesting the Philosopher's Stone to be stolen for him. Yes, that sounded more like it.

Early morning had Harry going outside to practise wandless magic. With no wounds to speak of that he could heal, Sir had given him two choices. Either he could harm himself, not an appealing thought, or he could practise by attempting to learn the same way he had with a wand. That is, learning very basic spells such as levitation. It had not taken much thought, or any at all, really, for Harry to choose the second option.

Though he did not have a wand, he still needed to speak the incantation. Casting silent spells wandlessly would come later if he ever managed to succeed in casting most first year spells. That day seemed a far, nearly at Japan far, away. Even with his arm he still hadn't managed the basic healing spell he had attempted, though at least he had been able to do a *little*.

Harry had only pushed open the great wooden door to the grounds, fully prepared for the pleasant sight of the wind swaying the grass in the early rays of the sun and the ever alluring forest calling to him so temptingly, when he froze in shock. If he had his wand he would have dropped it.

Hagrid's hut and the surrounding forest were ablaze in a raging fire. Half of the visible trees were alighted and who knew how many behind them. Thick billows of ashen smoke curled upwards towards the heavens. Everything seemed to be cast into an amber light from the flames that licked the wood and leaves.

It felt like part of Harry was being eaten by the flames along with each tree that was burning, it honestly did. Maybe it was because the forest was the only place he was ever truly at peace or maybe it was because his arm was the wood of one of the trees, possibly one that was burning, but the trees had a place in his being and he felt very protective on them. It pained him a lot to see them burn so freely.

As soon as the initial shock wore off, panic set in. The forest was on *fire!* And Hagrid's hut, he remembered as an afterthought. He didn't much care about the hut. The gamekeeper shouldn't live somewhere so flammable. But still, fire! Everyone was asleep, Harry had no wand and little magical ability to speak of and he had no idea where to find someone who could in some way help prevent the fire from spreading. He was in quite a pickle.

He could search the castle for a teacher but who knew how many trees would fall victim in the time it took him to find one? What else could he do? The forest was *burning!*

In a split moment he knew what to do and jumped into action. For years he had done accidental magic on will – well not on will, but close to it with some effort. If he could apparate whilst falling off a building he could put out flames. And by Jove he was going to do it.

Running flat out towards the forest – he had never done anything of this magnitude so he figured it was best to be at close quarters – Harry tried to focus his will, like he used to do. *Go out, fire, go out.* He closed his eyes. *Please go out.* He thought about snuffing out the fire with a huge gust of wind, with no oxygen. He still remembered a little from his muggle school. *Wind, put fire out.* Rain to dampen the trees to stop them catching fire again. *Water, come, stop fire.* If only the air would just eat the fire up, that would be easiest. *Fire, go out. Go –*

The sound of the crackling fire lessened and Harry opened his eyes. The outer trees – and Hagrid's hut – had ceased to burn but those

behind seemed to burn stronger as if to compensate. He found himself panting from the effort and energy it had taken but he couldn't stop. There were so many trees on *fire*!

Harry dashed into the forest till the trees that remained on fire started their ring of flames only a few metres in front of him. He closed his eyes and – panting heavily – tried to focus his will again.

The sound of the flames eating their prey. *Fire go out*. The smell of the burning wood. *Air eat fire*. The flashes of colour behind his eyelids. *No more fire*. The heat against his face. *Out, fire, out*. There were no birds here now. *No more **fire**!*

Silence. Sweet, sweet silence. No burning, no smell, no dancing colours, no more fire. Harry opened his eyes and felt himself sway. He had done it. The fire was out.

His relief was short lived, however, as he promptly collapsed, all his energy and strength zapped from him and disappearing like the fire.

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Roaring. Something was roaring. There was a crackling sound and there was a strange scent in the air. The air felt thick, too. How odd.

Harry blearily opened his eyes and took a deep breath. And promptly coughed as he inhaled black smoky air. All around him was fire; trees on fire, shrubbery on fire, heck, he was the only thing *not* on fire! But that wasn't right... hadn't he put out the fire? Yes, that was why he was currently lying on the ground with a tree root very uncomfortably poking him in the ribs. It explained his lack of energy, too. He felt weak and sluggish but he knew he couldn't stay there, not if there was a seemingly regenerating fire that had chosen the forest as a good place to burn. He might not be that smart but he knew that fire meant danger.

Shakily he got to his feet, and struggled not to collapse again. The already dancing flames swayed dangerously. Covering his mouth with his sleeve to avoid inhaling the thick, putrid air, he started forwards, stumbling immediately. Thankfully, a shoot of adrenaline boosted his energy as a flaming tree trunk fell just inches in front of

him. A step forwards and he would have been flattened like a pancake. Flattened and *burnt* like a pancake.

Trees were burning on either side of him as he – stumbling over half burnt roots more than once – slowly made his way out of the forest. He felt like he might fall asleep standing up if he stopped moving. This incentive, and the threat of being burnt to a crisp, kept him moving, slowly but surely. It seemed he had gone a lot further in than he had thought, but, he supposed, he had been running then and was focused on putting out the fire. Barely having enough energy to dodge around flaming trees or jump over shoots of fire, the thought of attempting to put the fire out *again* did not even enter Harry's mind.

Eventually he came to the edge of the trees, but it wasn't the edge, was it? The walls of burning trees had stopped but he was not at the edge of the forest. In front of him was twenty yards of trees, burnt black and leafless. They reeked of destruction.

"I should have known you would be involved, *Potter*."

Harry blinked and looked to his left. Snape was there, wand out, attempting to douse the flames of the trees behind Harry with water. Looking around he realised that there were other teachers – most of the teaching staff by the looks of it - also trying to douse the flames but no one had noticed him, just Snape.

"Thought you'd be clever did you? I suppose you thought you were being terribly courageous by setting the forest on fire. You won't be feeling so great when the headmaster gets his hands on you," Snape sneered, without even pausing in his fire fighting.

It was all Harry could do to stare at him, outraged, as Snape forced him backwards with magic and forced him to stay beside a corpse of a tree so he didn't "do any more damage". He didn't even have energy to protest. He would do plenty of that later when the forest stopped its infernal burning.

Really, he thought as he slumped to the ground, Snape had some nerve. Just because he had punched Malfoy, given Ron a concussion and stuck needles through the twins' feet, it *must* mean that he had set the forbidden forest on fire, never mind the fact that it was

possibly his favourite place in the whole damned school. Hell, he had even put the thing *out* – much more effectively than the teachers were, he noted with glee. And then the bloody thing had regenerated itself!

“You didn’ set the forest on fire, did you?” he asked Sir suspiciously. To his relief Sir sounded highly affronted.

“No! Thank you very much, but my hobbies lie somewhere other than setting fires to trees. What would I have gained from it? Killing the body I currently inhabit would not be advisable.”

“Just checking...” So how did the fire start then? Either time. Magic was strange but things didn’t just spontaneously combust any more in the wizarding world than the muggle one, right? He saw a bird flying above the trees in the distance with mild surprise. All the other birds had fled from the fire.

It took the teachers a long time to successfully extinguish the fire completely. They kept having small fires rekindle after they had moved on; they did not seem to quite grasp the fact that if you left a couple of glowing splinters the fire would start up again. Although at one point it had been amusing to watch Professor Flitwick dance about for a moment when his hat caught fire.

“I would not tell Dumbledore about your extinguishing of the fire the first time. He should not know of your... talents.”

Before he could ask why, however, Dumbledore was walking towards him with Snape at his heels, looking furious, again.

“What, Mister Potter, did you hope to achieve from *this*?” asked Dumbledore coldly once they had arrived.

Glaring at his chin, Harry replied with sarcasm, “Oh ye know me, ah set things on fire. It’s ma favourite bloody past time tae set trees on fire an’ then sit in the bloody middle of it.” Unfortunately he was breathing heavily while he said it, it taking him a lot of effort to even fulfil the simple act of talking, and had to pause to cough a couple of times, which rather ruined the dramatics of it.

“There was no one besides you out here, *Potter*, it is obvious who the culprit is so there is no point denying it.” If he had more energy, Harry would have broken Snape’s abnormally large nose. With some difficulty he got to his feet.

“Ah *didn’t* set yer bloody forest on fire!”

“Care to explain your sudden lack of your usual energy then, Mister Potter?” Even without looking Dumbledore in the eye, Harry could tell he was looking at him over the tops of his half-moon spectacles in anger.

“Ah just escaped from a burnin’ forest! Ah think am entitled to be a little tired.” Wasn’t Dumbledore supposed to be the guy that gave people the benefit of the doubt and second chances? It was a tad out of character for him to be so accusatory. Although, he thought bemusedly, by now he was probably on his fifth or sixth chance.

“In that case, what –“ Dumbledore began, but he was cut off by an inhuman screech from the air.

Harry looked up and saw the bird he had seen circling over the tops of the forest before but it wasn’t a bird. It had wings, yes, but it was most definitely *not* a bird. It was black and its wings were spiny and huge compared to its skinny jet body. It had a long snout with wide nostrils, stubs of horns and bulging orange eyes. No, it was not a bird. It was a dragon.

The dragon swooped down and landed before them.

“Well that’s certainly interesting,” mused Dumbledore, with a faint hint of amusement in his voice. Again, if he had the energy, he would have broken someone’s nose. How could Dumbledore say it was “interesting” when just a few moments ago he had been furious with Harry for starting the fire?

Apparently the dragon thought Dumbledore was a bit off too, as it gave a cough and flames shot out of its snout and set his beard on fire. The flames not only caught Dumbledore’s ridiculously long beard though; they also caught Snape’s greasy hair. Snape immediately glowered at the creature and put his hair out but it looked rather

worse for the wear all the same. Harry struggled to contain his laughter but Dumbledore was unfazed and let his beard burn freely. Definitely crazy.

“Not to worry, not to worry,” he said pleasantly. “My beard is fireproof just in case of such an occurrence.”

While Harry thought it was a little odd that Dumbledore took precautions against fire breathing dragons, he did not comment on it. Instead he matched Snape’s glower at the dragon with one of his own. “Still think ah started the fire, Snivellus?”

Unfortunately Snape was saved from answering by the dragon as it gave another screech, leapt into the air, and flew towards a dark shadow emerging from the forest. Though the dragon was over waist-height on Dumbledore, who was by no means short, it did not reach the waist of the figure. That meant it could only be one person. Hagrid.

True enough it was Hagrid, though when he reached them he was looking more than a little worse for the wear. His clothes were frayed and singed at the edges and had burnt patches at various intervals. *His* beard looked like it had been set on fire more than once with no charms to aid it.

“Professor Dumbledore, sir, he didn’ mean it! I was just lettin’ him out fer some exercise an’ ‘e got away! Too long cooped up in me hut but it wasn’ his fault! I –“ Hagrid stopped his rambling when Dumbledore raised a hand to silence him. The fire in the headmasters beard had died out.

“Hagrid, Hagrid, calm yourself. There is no harm done.”

“No harm done? Headmaster, hundreds of trees were affected by the fire!” Much as he disliked him, Harry was inclined to agree with Snape.

“How come with him it’s “no harm done” but when ye thought it was me ye were ready to eat me?”

For some reason this seemed to amuse the old coot. “I assure you, my boy, under no circumstance will I eat you.”

Forcing himself to remain at least somewhat calm, Harry said scathingly, "I didn't mean *literally*."

After that the three adults mostly ignored Harry, though occasionally on Snape's part sending him glares. They discussed for a time what to do with the dragon and eventually Hagrid was persuaded to send it to a dragon reserve in the south of Scotland so he could visit from time to time. The next thing they talked about over Harry's head was what they could do for the forest. He was outraged to hear their decision of planting new trees to *replace* the ones that had perished in the fire. The forest was a place of nature and you could not simply *replace* the trees. They were part of the forest and helped make it such. It should be left to its own devices and not interfered with by wizards.

He had tried to leave several times during the discussions but had found himself unable. Either Snape's spell was still holding him there, Dumbledore had cast another or Sir was preventing him for whatever reason. It was impossible to determine which.

When they were finally done talking, and Hagrid had gone off to spend his last day with "Norbert" as he had christened the dragon and Snape and swept up to the school, Dumbledore suggested that Harry go to the Hospital Wing. With a little more rudeness than was strictly necessary, he refused. He had done magic like that before, though never of that magnitude, and knew all he needed was some sleep. Some badly needed sleep.

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Harry awoke suddenly and on instinct rolled off the bed and landed in a crouch. He had been so tired he had not even noticed the ridiculous softness of the bed and had fallen asleep before he had even laid fully down on it. Now, however, he was wide awake and did not miss the blue beam of light that he had narrowly avoided. In an instant there was a knife in his hand.

"What the hell do ye think yer doin', Weasel?" Harry stood upright glaring at the youngest Weasley who was standing, wand outstretched, looking a tad dumbstruck. "Did ye think that just 'cause ah don' have a wand, am defenceless? Think again Weasley." By

now the other boy was frozen in fear as Harry advanced on him brandishing his knife.

He had to make sure the boy wouldn't attack him again. Who knew what would happen if he tried it again and succeeded? If he did something to ward Ron off, he would probably tell others and they too would not attack him.

Repulsed and hating himself for what he was about to do, Harry took Ron's wand off him, which took surprisingly little effort. The boy really was frozen in fear, eyes never leaving the knife. Harry took hold of his neck firmly in one hand so he could not run if he tried and raised the knife to his face. Slowly and carefully he cut his initials onto the boy's face, drawing blood immediately, one initial on each cheek.

"Don' make me do worse, Weasley. You know I can."

It did not take long for Weasley to inform the whole of Hogwarts of what had happened in the dormitory. In fact, by the time dinner came which was only a few hours later, every pupil was looking at him with even more fear than they had been the previous day. Well, *nearly* every pupil. The Granger girl simply frowned at him, the twins in determination, though determination for what Harry couldn't guess, and Malfoy was looking at him with... respect?

Eating his dinner and dutifully ignoring the stares from students and teachers alike, Harry wondered when he had grown such a large conscience. Before he had come to Hogwarts he had not thought twice about dealing others injury. He had even drunk to it. Before he would have happily knifed someone in a fight, and even cheat by using magic if he was losing, but now he was feeling guilty about just cutting Ron. But this wasn't the streets. Yet it was remarkably similar. Unless you were liked by everyone you were bound to get into fights. It wasn't possible to be liked by everyone even if you wanted to be so that meant that at one point in time everyone at Hogwarts got into a fight with someone. The only way to prevent being attacked in that case was to be feared. If all the Ron's at Hogwarts were sufficiently scared of him he would be left in peace. Just like the streets.

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Harry was in the library after dinner reading a book on potions under Sir's orders when the first person dared to approach him. And it would have to be Granger.

"Is it true what they're saying?"

He looked at her. How was he supposed to know what "they" were saying when he so obviously didn't like to be around them? "Depends what they're saying."

To his annoyance she rolled her eyes and sat down beside him. "People have been saying that over Christmas you lured the Weasley twins out onto the grounds where you would be hidden then you maimed them! They said that you nailed their feet to the ground with needles! Oh there's also a rumour that you're the one who set the forest on –"

"I *didn't* set the forest on fire!"

"-fire this morning. And Ron's face! Did you really give him those cuts? It's ghastly."

Well that was about the gist of what he had done – other than the fire, of course. When you said it all together like that it did sound rather fear-inspiring, for which he was glad. "That's surprisingly accurate. Except for the forest – I didn' bloody set it on fire!"

She looked somewhat disappointed at his answer. "But *why*?"

What to tell her? Obviously he couldn't tell her the truth. Sir would never allow that. He wanted rid of her though; she was becoming increasingly persistent in her attempts at friendship. She had no friends though she seemed a nice enough person but Harry couldn't be the one to give her friendship. Only danger would come to her if she did. No, he needed to do something to dissuade her once and for all.

"*Call her a mudblood. There is no greater insult for her than that.*" Well Sir would know all about insults.

“Listen here, Granger. Ah don’ *want* friends here. Ah don’ *like* the people here and ah *don’* want tae be yer friend. People here can’t keep their nose out of other people’s business, you included. If ah wanted friends there are better people than filthy little mudbloods like you.”

That about did it. Granger’s face crumpled as he spoke and her eyes filled with tears before she sprang to her feet and ran out of the library. Thankful that he had finally gotten rid of her, Harry went back to his reading. And was promptly interrupted again.

“You’re full of surprises White.”

Harry sighed. “Hello Malfoy.”

“Oh yes, hello. You know, just when I thought I had figured you out you turn around and surprise me. Right now I’m inclined to believe that you just have people issues,” he said silkily.

People issues? Really? Well it wasn’t *that* surprising. Unless you could see into his head, Harry doubted anyone would really be able to guess his motives for doing things. So that meant only Sir would be able to tell why he did things. “Did ye want somthin’?”

Malfoy smirked. “Always get straight to the point, don’t you? I want an answer to my offer. I don’t want to be your friend; that would be stupid beyond reason. I merely want to be your ally. We could be powerful together, you know that. It would mean that if the need ever arose, we could call on each other for support. What do you say?”

“Okay.” This answer would keep Malfoy from poking around in his affairs for a while and who knew? Maybe it would come in handy sometime.

Later that night when Harry was reading in The Room instead of going to bed (sleeping off his exhaustion earlier made him wide awake now) Sir asked where he had learnt to do magic like the magic he had used against the fire.

“Well, ah s’pose ah just kind of... knew. When Dumbledore’s goons attacked Aunt Petunia ah did it fer the first time and after that ah just

did it. Never did anything that big before though.” Why was Sir asking? Shouldn’t he have been happy that he had done magic without a wand?

“I have never seen magic done like that before, and I am by no means young. It went against the very laws of casting spells. Instead of channelling the earth’s magic through you, you extended your will and manipulated the magic already present in the atmosphere. It was... interesting to witness.”

Days passed about as normally as was possible for a school of magic and days turned to weeks and weeks turned to months. Harry progressed remarkably well in his wandless magic and could perform nearly all the first year spells without his wand though Sir still claimed he was cheating by having a wooden arm. No one attempted to attack him again; most avoided him with a wide berth. Dumbledore had not given him his wand back, despite not having done anything beyond sharing a few insults with Snape. All the teachers began loading tumultuous amounts of homework upon them in preparation for exams. The end of the year was fast approaching and Harry had still not attempted to get the Philosopher’s Stone. Time was running out.

On the day that Harry had the last of his exams (all of which he found incredibly easy thanks to Sir’s teachings) he overheard Ron talking to Professor McGonagall, sounding even more panicked than usual. Ron kept insisting to her that he wanted to see Dumbledore but she was having none of it.

“Professor Dumbledore will be back tomorrow, Mister Weasley. I assure you, the Ministry of Magic is far more important than whatever it is you wish to discuss. I suggest you go outside and enjoy the sunshine.”

It was the perfect opportunity. With not long left till the end of term there wouldn’t come a better opportunity to try and get the stone. Dumbledore would be far away and unable to interfere. Harry was going through the trapdoor that night.

That night, when the rest of the castle's occupants had gone to bed, Harry snuck out of the Gryffindor tower using the map to make sure Filch and Mrs Norris were nowhere in the immediate vicinity. It took him almost no time at all to reach the third floor corridor with the help of some secret passageways the map showed him. Wiping the map blank, he approached the door at the end of the corridor with caution, drawing the Wizzarding Wireless Network – which seemed remarkably like a radio – out of his robes as he went.

To Harry's immense surprise, and confusion, the door was ajar. He doubted anyone would leave it open on purpose; the threat of the large three-headed dog escaping would see to that. That meant someone had left it open by accident. Had someone (Hagrid, perhaps,) been checking on the dog and forgotten to close the door completely? Or had someone already gone through in hopes of getting the stone...

Not wasting anymore time pondering the unexplainable, he turned on the WWN and turned it to the most lulling tune he could find. He put it inside the door, waited a few seconds, and then followed it. The massive dog was swaying slightly, its growls ceasing, and it fell to the ground in a deep slumber. Strangely enough, there was a harp lying at its feet as if someone had attempted to put it asleep already.

Harry moved swiftly over to the trap door, not wasting any time just in case the dog *did* wake up, and pulled it open by its ring. It swung upwards as it opened and left a hole of the deepest black in its place. He frowned into the abyss. There was no way he was jumping into a hole with no idea of what awaited him below; it would be foolish beyond reason.

Concentrating hard, he pulled off his right hand glove and said, "Lumos." A ball of light appeared in his hand and, with a large force of will, he sent it down into the hole. Some distance below was a mess of large green vines and tendrils. As soon as the light hit the plant, however, the long creepers crept away from it towards the damp walls. Harry snorted derisively. It was Devil's Snare, a plant which

would twist its vines around you and kill you through suffocation. So far Dumbledore wasn't doing a very good job of protecting his stone.

"Dumbledore is a fool. If you can get past his traps, anyone can."

Harry rolled his eyes and jumped into the hole, taking his ball of light with him. He landed with a thud on the hard ground but suffered no more than a few bruises. Had the Devil's Snare been left in place, the landing would have been much softer.

There was only one exit from the room was down a dark stone passageway, so that was where he went. The Devil's Snare that had tried to escape from the light, shrunk away from him when he got near. It was eerily silent and the only sound other than his footsteps was a steady dripping of water from the ceiling onto the floor. One such drop found its way down his back and he shivered. It was icy cold.

At the end of the passageway was a brightly lit chamber with a ceiling that arched high above him. Harry relinquished his hold on the ball of light and it vanished instantly. Fluttering all about the ceiling were small, jewel-bright birds and at the opposite end of the chamber was a heavy wooden door. Frowning again, Harry considered this. No doubt it would not be as simple as crossing the room and opening the door. No matter how crazy Dumbledore was, even *he* wouldn't make it that easy. He looked at the birds again, watching them glittering against the light.

Wait, glittering? Of course! They were keys which meant he would have to catch the one that fit the door. Harry's attention was drawn to a couple of broomsticks that were stationed in the corner and he groaned. He hated heights.

Nevertheless, he mounted a broom and took off into the air, snatching and grabbing at nearby keys but none of them fit the door.

"You could always freeze them so they would be easier to catch." Harry blinked. That would make it a bit *too* easy, so naturally there would be spells warding against it. *"You would be surprised how often wizards will overcomplicate matters."*

“Immobulus!” Surprisingly enough, it worked and the keys froze mid-air. From his vantage point in the middle of the ceiling, Harry saw that one key had its left wing bent at a funny angle, as if someone had caught it before. He grabbed it from the air and hurriedly descended to earth. Sure enough, it fit the door perfectly and Harry entered the next room.

The chamber was so dark at first that Harry couldn't see anything at all but the moment he stepped forwards light flooded it to reveal an astonishing sight. In front of him was a giant chessboard with equally giant pieces. He was standing behind the black chessmen that seemed to be carved from stone.

He blinked. Surely not? Hesitantly, Harry put his hand on one of the black pieces and jumped as the bishop he had touched sprung to life. “Erm, ah don' have tae play tae get through do ah?” The bishop nodded. “Erm, do ah have to *win*?” The bishop nodded again.

Harry groaned. Why did it have to be chess? Why couldn't it have been draughts? At least he understood *how* to play draughts, even if he was no good at it. (1)

“Luck for you, boy, I happen to be an excellent chess player.” Harry blinked in wonder. Why would anyone voluntarily play chess for *fun*? *“Now, take the place of the king. I may have to sacrifice pieces and I have no wish for you to be one of them. It would hamper your efforts at getting the stone, somewhat. The king is the last piece taken even if we were going to lose, which we are not.”*

It turned out Sir was good at chess and it took them very little time at all to win. As Harry ordered the last piece to corner the white king into checkmate on Sir's orders, the king took off his crown and threw it to the ground. The game had been very vicious, exactly like real wizard's chess. When a piece was taken, it was... *dismantled* by the opposing colour. It made him very thankful indeed that Sir had made him the king.

“And that, boy, is a perfect example of Patzer's Attack.”

“If ye say so...” Harry muttered. He had not had the slightest idea of what Sir was talking about as he ordered pieces about in what he

said was a “Bogo Indian” opening. He made his way to the door and the chessmen bowed out of the way leaving the way clear.

As he reached the door at the end of another passageway a disgusting, yet familiar, smell filled his nostrils. In front of him was a troll, even larger than the monstrosity he had saved Granger from on Halloween. This one, however, was already out cold with a bloody lump on its head, as if someone had already passed this way.

Eager to get away from the foul-smelling beast, he quickly stepped over the enormous thing and entered the next chamber and sighed in annoyance as he saw he was not yet at the end of the futile attempts to prevent anyone getting the stone.

As soon as Harry had stepped into the room and started towards the table where seven bottles and piece of parchment were waiting, purple flames shot up in the doorway through which he had entered and black flames sprang up in the opposite doorway. He ignored the fires and read the piece of paper and promptly tossed it over his shoulder.

The riddle that was written there was severely overcomplicated. Uncorking the bottles he sniffed them until he had located the two nettle wines. Not only were they the only ones that smelt identical, Nymph had a phase where she was obsessed with the stuff, so he knew it well. It was simple to locate two of the poisons then (“You will always find some on nettle wine’s left side”). That left the smallest bottle and two others of medium size compared to the rest. One of the medium sized bottles stood at the end, so Harry knew this was not the one he was looking for (“But if you would move onwards, neither is your friend”). As it was different from the bottle at the other end, he knew it was not poison (“different are those that stand at either end”). That meant out of the two bottles he had left, one was poison and since “neither dwarf nor giant holds death in their insides” he knew the smallest bottle was what he was looking for.

Harry took a swig from one of the nettle wines and then gulped down the smallest bottle’s contents. There was barely a mouthful left in it (almost as if someone had drunk it before him) but it still felt like he was swallowing ice. He smashed the bottle against the ground and

walked towards the black flames. He braced himself, saw the flames licking his body but couldn't feel them – for a moment he could see nothing but dark fire – then he was on the other side, in the last chamber.

The room was large and empty, save two things. One was a large, magnificent mirror, taller than any man except perhaps Hagrid, with an ornate gold frame, standing on two feet. There was an inscription around the top: *Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi*. The other thing that stopped the room being completely empty, was Quirrell, in all his garlic-smelling turbaned glory.

Harry blinked. Quirrell was still there. He blinked again.

“What the bloody hell are *you* doing here?”

Quirrell smiled, his face devoid of its usual nervous twitch. “I wondered when I'd be meeting you here, Potter.”

It took Harry a moment to remember that Quirrell had been present on Halloween night when he had been revealed as Harry Potter. After that it took him another moment to realise that Quirrell had expected him to come. The harp, the key's bent wing, the knocked out troll, the half-gone potion. It all connected, but why was Quirrell here? Of course! *He* must have been the one to suspect that Harry was going after the stone and have been only too eager to catch him, no doubt for the glory of having done so.

“Ah'd have thought it would be Snape waitin' down here,” Harry said, with blunt honesty. He was only saying something in an effort to distract Quirrell while he tried to figure out how to get the stone.

“Severus?” Quirrell laughed and it wasn't his usual quivering treble, either, but cold and sharp. “Yes, Severus does seem the type, doesn't he? So useful to have him swooping around like an overgrown bat. Next to him, who would suspect p-p-poor st-stuttering P-Professor Quirrell?”

“Glad ah'm not the only one who thinks he's bat-like,” Harry replied absent mindedly, mind whirring. “Ye didn' answer my first question. What are ye doin' here?” Again it was just meaningless words that

came out of his mouth but he was distracted by wondering what the strange mirror was.

The “professor” faltered. “If you don’t know what *I’m* doing down here, then why did *you* come?”

What would Quirrell’s coming have to do with his coming? Unless... unless Quirrell was after the stone too! Things just got a whole lot more complicated, Harry thought.

“I was looking for the tooth fairy?” he suggested not a bit hopefully but he needn’t have wasted his breath. Quirrell appeared to have reached the same conclusion he had.

The turbaned man laughed mockingly. “*You* want the stone? *You*? What could *you* want the stone for?”

Harry frowned, somewhat petulantly, at being laughed at. “Ah could ask you the same thing.” What gave Quirrell the right to control the conversation any more than he? They had both gotten past all of Dumbledore’s little tricks and were both after the same thing. It was just a matter of who managed to extract it from the mirror first. At least that’s what Harry assumed had to be done. What else could the mirror be there for?

“I, Potter, am acquiring it for someone else,” Quirrell replied stonily. “Expelliarmus!” From Harry’s sleeve flew a knife, from his pocket another and from his boot his last. Quirrell frowned in confusion. “Where’s your wand, boy?”

“Dumbledore still has it,” Harry replied equally coldly and spitting out Dumbledore’s name. Without warning, he cried, “Expelliarmus!” Quirrell’s wand flew from his hand.

“Oh well done, Potter. I must say, I’m impressed. You got down here with no wand? Quite a feat for a first year. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a stone to be getting.” Quirrell turned to the mirror, leaving Harry standing there, bristling in annoyance at being brushed aside.

"The mirror is the key to finding the Stone," he murmured. "I see the Stone... I'm presenting it to my master... but where is it? I don't understand... Is the Stone *inside* the mirror? Should I break it?"

Harry, having no more idea what the mirror was used for than Quirrell, tried to edge to left the take a look in the mirror for himself. It would do no good to get into a fight at this point in time with Quirrell. The man was older than he and no doubt could do a lot more wandless magic than he could.

"Your *master*?" he could not help but ask incredulously. "Who are you getting the stone for?"

"A different person than you, Potter." Quirrell was not to be distracted however. "What does this mirror do? How does it work? Help me, master!"

Harry took a step backwards and started gaping like a fish when, to his amazement, a voice answered from within Quirrell.

"Use the boy... Use the boy..."

Quirrell rounded on Harry. "Yes, Potter come here."

He remained resolutely where he was. "Why should I? Why should ah help you get the stone for ye'r *master*, when ah need to get it fer someone else?"

"Let me speak to him... face to face..." the high voice from within Quirrell said.

"Master, you are not strong enough!"

Not *strong* enough? What exactly was this master? As far as Harry could tell there was no one in the room beside him and Quirrell. Suddenly he remembered Sir. Could Quirrell be inhabiting his own bodiless spirit?

"I have strength enough... for this..."

Harry watched, still gaping like a fish in a barrel, as Quirrell reached up and unwound his turban from his head. As soon as the turban fell away – making Quirrell's head seem strangely small – he turned on the spot. Where the back of his head should have been, was another face. It was chalk-white with glowing red eyes and slits for nostrils.

“Harry Potter...” it whispered. “You look very different from when we last met.”

Harry blinked and forced his mouth to work. “Have we met? Am pretty sure ah'd remember a face in the back of a guys head...”

The face blinked slowly. “Do you not recognise me? Do you not know who I am?”

He shook his head. Just to be sure there wasn't a face extending out the back of his own head because of Sir, he reached up and felt it. There was a perfectly normal back of a head. With a sigh of relief he answered the face. “Well ye're not the tooth fairy...”

To his surprise the face seemed amused by this. “I am –“ it cut off abruptly and it's eyes darted wildly around as if looking for someone he could not see. “Who - ?” it began again only to cut off. The face nodded, which looked very strange considering it was the back of a head. Then it smiled.

“I believe we fight the same battle.”

What? Maybe it was talking about... what? “Eh? Come again?”

“I was not always like this, a mere shadow and vapour, only having a form when I can share another's body.”

“Shocking,” Harry muttered.

“Don't mock, you impudent boy.”

“Dumbledore has forced me to become this. He tricked me into believing something was my downfall and it resulted in my becoming this. Unicorn blood has strengthened me these past few weeks... you saw faithful Quirrell drinking it for me in the forest... and once I have

the Elixir of Life, I will be able to create a body of my own and exact my revenge on Dumbledore. I will only need to use it once, to create my own body and after that you could deliver it to whoever you need to."

Harry bit his lip in thought. It wasn't of his concern what happened to this other bodiless entity but if it could help him take revenge on Dumbledore... There seemed to be a lot of people who wanted revenge or hated that old coot but then again, it wasn't all that surprising considering what he was capable of. He would still be fulfilling his debt to Jacques, just slightly later than intended. Surely the centaur would not mind. Another thought struck Harry. If the stone could help the face create a body, then it could help create one for Sir too. He could be *free* of Sir...

"Okay."

Bodiless spirit number two smiled. "Excellent. You are wise beyond your years, boy. Now take a look in that mirror."

Bracing himself, Harry stepped forwards towards the mirror with his eyes closed and opened them again. A swirl of images shone back at him, none discernable until finally the colours stopped spinning and it was only Harry left. Strangely, his reflection was not in the guise of Jeremy but was his true reflection. Mirror Harry smiled at him, reached into his pocket, pulled out a blood red stone and put it back into his pocket – and as it did so, Harry felt something drop into his real pocket. He turned back to the back of Quirrell's head.

"Well done, Harry," said the face. "It will take some time to make the Elixir of Life, so it would be best if you create a story to stop Dumbledore's suspicions from arousing. He will expect you to have fought me, so if you give me the stone, I will knock you unconscious so it appears you did not do so willingly. I will disappear for a short time so that Quirrell can make the Elixir, then I shall return the stone to you."

Harry frowned. No one had said anything about knocking him unconscious. And how was he to know that the face would keep his word and return the stone to him? It could easily run off with the stone.

"He speaks the truth," said Sir. *"Remember, I have ways to tell if someone is lying."*

"I honour my debts," said that high pitched voice. What was it, read Harry Potter's thoughts day? "I could never stand being indebted to someone."

The voice didn't reassure Harry that much but accompanied with Sir's input he was swayed. It would not benefit Sir to lie; if he did he would not be able to get a body of his own. He nodded and held out the stone.

Quirrell turned around and took it from him, gasping as where their skin touched blisters appeared on his hand. Quirrell seemed to ignore the pain it caused him, however.

"Goodbye for now, Harry Potter," came the voice from the back of Quirrell. "Until we meet again."

Quirrell's wand zoomed to his hand and with one sharp wave of it, Harry was blasted through the air and slammed into the wall behind him. He cried out in pain and the world quickly faded from consciousness and his vision went black.

Just before he relinquished his hold on the world completely though, he could have sworn he heard someone call his name.

There was something gold shining just above him. How curious.

He blinked. It was a pair of glasses, but, glasses didn't float above people's heads, did they?

He blinked again and the smiling face of Albus Dumbledore swam into view above him. "Good afternoon, Harry."

Harry stared at him, not quite sure what he was doing lying in an uncomfortably soft bed with Dumbledore smiling down at him. He appeared to be in a white room as well, not the Gryffindor tower. In a flash everything came back to him. The stone, Quirrell, crazy spirit number two, the mirror. At the same time as he was hit with all this information, his mind went blank. Dumbledore was still smiling down at him. What could he say? What did Dumbledore know? He remembered being told to act like he had fought.

"Quirrell! He's got the stone! Quick –"

"Calm yourself, my dear –" Dumbledore broke off into a cough but Harry was sure he had been about to say "boy" and had caught himself just in time. "The stone has been destroyed."

"*What?*" The spirit – and Quirrell – what had happened to them? More importantly, how was he going to get Sir out of his head now? He realised Dumbledore was staring at him, probably wondering why he had seemed so shocked. He racked his mind for something to say.

"Ask him if Nicolas Flamel will die now."

Relief washed over him. If only Sir was that helpful all the time. "But – but Nicolas Flamel! He'll die now, won't he?" Even he had to marvel at his acting skills.

"Oh, you know about Nicolas?" Dumbledore was sounding quite delighted at this. Harry wondered who this Nicolas Flamel was. "I say, you *did* do the thing properly didn't you? He and I had a little chat and

we decided it was for the best. He has had enough Elixir stored to set his affairs in order and then, yes, he will die.”

They fell into silence, Harry carefully avoiding eye-contact as per usual. He was waiting for Dumbledore to explain what had happened. Before he had fallen unconscious Quirrell had been about to leave, the stone safely in his possession, so they must have been stopped directly after he had fallen into oblivion. As the silence stretched on, Harry could take it no longer.

“So are ye goin’ tae tell me what happened or not?”

Dumbledore seemed to find this amusing. “Ah, yes. I arrived just in time to prevent Professor Quirrell escaping with it, though, from what I can tell, you must have been down there quite some time with him so must have been doing extraordinarily well on your own. Unfortunately the struggle killed him. He could not suppress the evil inside him.”

Harry wrinkled his nose. Evil indeed. Obviously Dumbledore was attempting to convince him that the spirit residing within Quirrell was evil so Harry would have no ideas about allying himself with him, but Quirrell had been killed? More likely it was Dumbledore silencing him or attempting to get rid of the spirit.

He frowned at Dumbledore’s nose. “Ah thought ye were in London though... how did ye know tae come?” There was something decidedly suspicious in Dumbledore’s tale. If only he could figure out what.

For his part, Dumbledore seemed quite surprised. “No sooner had I reached London than it became clear to me that the place I should be was the one I had just left. I arrived as Professor Quirrell slammed you into a wall.”

Something occurred to Harry. He had thought he had heard a voice as he had drifted away and now he was certain of it. “It was *you*.”

“Indeed. I feared I might be too late.”

"You nearly were," Harry replied resentfully, though not for the reason Dumbledore would assume. If Dumbledore had arrived just a little bit later Quirrell would have gotten away. "Quirrell almost escaped."

"Not Quirrell, Harry, *you* - you were nearly killed. For one terrible moment there, I was afraid it had."

Him? Dumbledore had been worried about *him*? Dumbledore, who had sent his parents and almost assuredly himself too to their death, was worried about putting him in danger? Dumbledore who had left him vulnerable to attacks in his own school, Dumbledore who was constantly trying to manipulate him to his own ends, was afraid he had died? *Why?* Surely the man must have been lying. There was simply no logical explanation for him to be worried about him. Unless he was truly concerned for his wellbeing...

And of course it was Sir who ruined this fleeting almost semi-hopeful notion. *"The audacity! He speaks the truth; he was worried you had been killed but only so that you would still be able to kill the Dark Lord for him."*

For some, unintelligible, reason, Harry's heart sank. He did not know why; perhaps he had liked the idea that Dumbledore wasn't as selfish as he was always showing or maybe he had simply liked the thought of being able to worry the ever unfazed Dumbledore. But as the realisation that he was, once again, wanted to be under someone's control, he found himself resenting the old man even more.

"Well if that's all, *Sir*, Ah'll be seeing ye later." To his disappointment, however, it appeared this was not all and Dumbledore, somewhat hesitantly, spoke again.

"Actually, my – ahem – Harry, there is something else which I wish to discuss with you. As you are aware, or perhaps not as you have been unconscious for several days, the school year ends in two days time. It is customary for pupils to return to their various homes through the same means in which they arrived, the Hogwarts Express. It is my wish for you to remain at Hogwarts instead of returning to wherever it was you were hiding all these years. It is simply not safe for you and there would be no means for anyone to check that you were not befallen to any harm. Furthermore, I believe all young persons such

as you require adult supervision which I am not sure you would receive to its fullest otherwise.”

As Dumbledore spoke Harry found himself going through various stages of shock and anger. His jaw had dropped, appalled at what he was hearing, he had started to mouth wordlessly, become indignant and at last found himself to be reaching for a knife that wasn't strapped to his arm as usual. He vaguely remembered being disarmed of it by Quirrell. Dumbledore seemed to recognise what he was doing and Harry felt, rather than saw, him look sternly over the tops of his half moon spectacles.

“Your knives are currently in the possession of the caretaker, Mr Filch. There is no use fighting me on this, Harry. You *will* be staying at Hogwarts this summer. I am only instructing so in your best interests.” Dumbledore turned to walk out of the Hospital Wing but paused at the door. “It may interest you to know that with the medication Madam Pomfrey has had to administer you, your appearance has reverted to its true form. Good day,” and he left with a faint *swoosh* of his robes.

He could see where Dumbledore was coming from. After all, of *course* keeping someone locked up so that they had no contact with the outside world, were kept under constant scrutiny and more easily manipulated was doing things in their “best interests”. He rather wished he *had* had his knives or even just one of them. It wouldn't have come to much anyway even if Harry had managed to lodge one in the old man as he had fantasized; Dumbledore was already in the perfect place to be treated for an injury.

True enough, when Harry looked in a mirror that was on his bedside table, his appearance had reverted to the clone of James Potter although his hair, for some perplexing reason, had retained the green highlights that the Weasley twins had given him so long ago. At least it looked quite good. His face was still thin, though not quite as stretched as it once had been, his eyes still green, and his hair roughly cut. Amazingly, he still wore his gloves and looked like they had been untouched and his arm undiscovered. It was hard to tell which appearance he liked better, Jeremy or Harry.

It was hard to quench the feeling of misery and foreboding that rose within him at the thought of spending the *entire* summer at Hogwarts with nothing but some house elves and Dumbledore for company. No doubt the rest of the teachers had homes to return to even if he hadn't. *Home*. Living in the streets and always changing location was Harry's version of home. Getting into fights and stealing, it was a good life with no rules, no psychotic wizards trying to use him. He had friends there, though he'd tried to put them off but some people were incorrigible. *Nymph!* He groaned. She was going to kill him for not returning but he could hardly help that. He only hoped she wouldn't do anything stupid.

Harry felt bare without even one solid defence in his possession. Not only had Dumbledore confiscated his wand he had taken his knives, treasured possessions he had loved. He knew he wouldn't feel safe until he had at least some form of weapon back; it would leave him even more vulnerable to attacks. The first step was to steal them back off Filch.

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Dumbledore frowned at the pile of papers on his desk. He simply could not focus on them anymore after talking with Harry. That the boy was so distrustful of him, *hated* him even, was heart-wrenching. He wasn't even sure what had brought the feelings of animosity about in the first place. It seemed to go deeper than simply his aunt telling him lies about him. He would never even know if it was his aunt.

The first – and only – time Harry had looked into his eyes had shown him a loathing so deep that he had only felt something akin to it a handful of times and always in the eyes of fully trained adversaries. To see it in one so young would be a terrifying ordeal for most, though he was no ordinary wizard and not so easily put out, forgive his lack of modesty.

Dumbledore truly felt regretful at having to keep the boy at Hogwarts rather than let him go where he pleased for the summer but it was a necessity. He could not risk losing the boy again, not after having spent so long to find him. If only Harry would trust him.

It had been a somewhat pleasant experience to find that Harry had gone down to protect the Philosopher's Stone from being abducted by Quirrell and Voldemort. Of course it had been unnerving to find that the boy had prevented them from succeeding for so long without even his wand and he had been more than a little scared for his welfare. It proved that young Harry wasn't lost to the dark after all, which was a great reassurance. The fact that he would endanger his own life to help others and do stand up for what he believed was right was marvellous.

It was rather strange, however. The boy seemed to switch between good and bad (for lack of better terms) so easily. He had put a boy in a coma, saved a girl from a vicious mountain troll, cruelly attacked two students and then saved the wizarding world from facing the rebirth of the darkest wizard in modern age. It was rather perplexing to Dumbledore how he switched to opposite ends of the spectrum so frequently and Dumbledore was not one used to being perplexed. He prided himself on seeing people's true intentions and motives but Harry was someone he could just not figure out and that bothered him. If there was one thing Albus Dumbledore could not stand it was not understanding a person so if he had to spend his entire summer watching the boy to understand him, he would. He would solve the mystery of Harry Potter.

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It was not ridiculously hard for Harry to avoid coming into contact with anyone in the school beside the nurse in the next day. No one came to visit him in the Hospital Wing, for which he was glad. He had half expected Malfoy or the Weasley twins to come badgering him about what he had done or why he had done it and was thankful for the peace. He simply hid in the Hospital Wing for the duration of the next day and the leaving feast reading a book. His reading skills had become much better with practise and he no longer was so disjointed in his reading. True he wasn't winning any gold medals for it but it had still improved.

It was lucky, too, that no one chose the last day to injure themselves enough to warrant a visit to Madam Pomfrey. Harry certainly heard them enough anyway. Students were not exactly discreet and many

of them passed the doors of the Hospital Wing gossiping most of the time about *him* but none of them having the nerve to attempt to visit him. From what he could decipher in their irritating excited chatter, they thought that he had stopped Quirrell escaping with the stone and fought courageously to do so. With no one else present down there, it must have been Dumbledore that told them but did that mean that was what Dumbledore himself believed? It made sense given that he had not interrogated him as to what he had been doing.

It was with a look of the deepest anguish that Harry watched the students rush about the next day as they prepared to leave the castle and take what seemed like carriages, from the distance he was looking at them from, to the Hogwarts Express. By the time they had all left the castle he found himself already missing their company. Not because he especially enjoyed being around them, far from it, but because they diverted the attention away from him. With them gone Harry was sure he would have the headmaster's undivided attention. It was going to be a long summer.

Harry stared up at the crystalline blue sky in frustration. It was several weeks into the school summer holiday and he was bored out of his mind. The rest of the population of Hogwarts had, of course, left to spend time with their loved ones except from Dumbledore, the headmaster, whom Harry spent his days tactfully avoiding. It wasn't very hard to avoid him. Most of the time it would be impossible to find the man, if Harry so chose. He didn't so choose, of course, but the option of not being capable of finding him was there, which was nice. The only really predictable times to find Dumbledore were at meal times, during which he always made an appearance in the Great Hall despite the lack of other people, and at other times it might be *possible* to locate him in his office but Harry never explored this idea. Avoiding him at meal times was exceptionally easy; Harry had a small appetite – a factor which had never gone away from his time spent living on the streets – and so ate little, often at irregular times. He simply went down to the school kitchens where the house elves were delighted to serve him food. They seemed ecstatic at the prospect of doing some work.

There was a severe lack of things to do with no classes or homework to do. The teacher's had assigned him homework, yes, but having nothing better to do, he had finished it in the first week of the holiday. He had also reread all his first year books and had them almost as well memorised as Hermione Granger. One afternoon he had found a note on top of a pile of books - amongst other things - on his trunk, stating that these were his school things from the upcoming year, from Dumbledore. Harry had subsequently read all of those books. Several times. He wasn't even a keen reader, just a bored one. His reading skills weren't exactly on par with his peers either, but they had improved greatly since he had come to Hogwarts, unsurprisingly. Having exhausted his school books, Harry had read many of the library's books on modern history in the hopes that he could finally discover the name of the Dark Lord that had murdered his parents. It wasn't very easy to hate him to his fullest potential if Harry didn't know his name. Strangely enough, none of the books had his name. Each one referred to him as "the Dark Lord" or other such titles. Once, though, he could have sworn a book had said his name but as soon

as he had reached it in the book, the letters seemed to fade before his very eyes too quickly for him to have been able to read it. It was almost as if someone had wiped it clean before his very eyes, like someone didn't want him to find out. It had definitely not been normal book behaviour.

The first day after the rest of the Hogwarts staff left the school, a week after the students' departure, Harry had been able to amuse himself for almost the entirety of the day. He had sat outside Filch's office for ten minutes wondering what sort of charms and hexes had been added to prevent intruders and how he could avoid them. He had then decided that there was nothing he could do one way or another and simply picked the lock on the door with a bent paperclip. It had surprised him greatly when it worked and no ill effects befell him. Harry had quickly recovered his three knives that had been confiscated and searched the drawers for any other objects that might have been of interest to him. To his disappointment they were all mundane things such as dungbombs and Fillibuster's Wet-Start No-Heat Fireworks. Enthused by his success with Filch's office, Harry had attempted to get into McGonagall's office – the member of staff he thought least likely to have placed any ill befitting curses. Unfortunately it was only Filch that allowed students to access his office so easily.

Harry's boredom problem wasn't helped by the fact that he wasn't allowed to perform magic. He had been given a ten minute lecture on how his magic, even accidental, wandless magic, was detectable by the Ministry of Magic and that the ministry monitored such things very carefully during the summer holidays to be wary of underage witches and wizards performing unsupervised magic. Normally this wouldn't have bothered Harry, and he had almost disregarded the warning completely, but it had then been expressed to him that the ministry would then detect that it was Harry Potter who had been using magic and would no doubt announce his return to the wizarding world, something he was none too keen on allowing to happen.

Not being able to leave the grounds of the castle had more than a few drawbacks, such as being incapable of going anywhere else. He had tried to leave through various means; some strange thing called "Floo", secret passageways, flying (though he had quickly

dismounted the broom when it became apparent this wasn't going to work – he wasn't so good with heights). He had even tried simply walking out of the gates, all to no avail. Every time he came to one of the borders a strange, tingling, sensation would overcome him and he was propelled back inside the borders with some force. The only thing Harry hadn't tried was to leave through the forest but he wasn't sure he wanted to risk going through there again. After all, he *had* lost his arm the last time.

One of Harry's main worries over not being able to leave was his appearance. Having being administered several potions after attempting to acquire the Philosopher's Stone, his appearance had reverted to its true form. Well, almost its true form. He still had green highlights through his jet-black hair from the failed attempts of the Weasley twins to prank him. It wasn't entirely clear to him *why* whatever potion they had slipped into his food had resulted in turning parts of his hair green, but he was inclined to believe that because it had been a potion that would change his appearance, it had reacted rather... badly with the one he had already taken. He also believed this to be the reason that his appearance changed back to its almost true self whenever he took a potion to heal his injuries.

Harry wasn't very sure how he was going to find another potion that would change his appearance back to Jeremy Hart White again. The only reason he had managed it once was that Nymph had the good foresight to supply him with an extra potion before leaving for Hogwarts. How she had gotten even the first one was still a mystery to him. It was also one of the reasons he was having trouble finding out where he could get one without going anywhere. He simply had no idea what type of potion it was. Several mounds of potions books had been checked, of course, but none had led him to any conclusions. Harry wondered if it was some ploy of Dumbledore's. Perhaps the bearded madman thought if he could not assume the appearance of Jeremy he would be forced to reveal himself as Harry Potter. Over his dead body.

In annoyance, Harry picked up a nearby stone and threw it viciously across the surface of the lake and watched in satisfaction as it made its entry into the water some distance away. The wind made casual waves along the surface and the giant squid added to them with its

own. Accompanied by the clear blue sky, it would have been very picturesque had he not been so desperate to be away from it. He threw another stone.

It really wasn't fair that Harry wasn't allowed to go away for the summer. After all, he had come the first time hadn't he? It wasn't as if he was just going to *hide* for the rest of his life in some little hole. Besides that, how was he supposed to learn enough magic to defend himself or to extract his much wanted revenge against Dumbledore if he didn't come to school? And even if there *were* wizards out for his blood as the bearded madman claimed, wouldn't he have encountered them before? The fact that he hadn't surely suggested that he could take care of himself whether he used magic or not. Vaguely he wondered whether this was another ploy of the headmaster's...

"Ello there 'arry!"

A voice spoke so suddenly out of the peaceful calm that he had become so accustomed to that Harry was jolted out of his thoughts, yelped in surprise and, while whipping round to defend himself against the attacker, tripped over a rock and fell into the lake. Thankfully it wasn't deep so close to shore so there was no risk in drowning. It did, however, leave him spluttering and soaking, completely defenceless against his attacker who was... laughing at him?

Harry wiped the water out of his eyes in an attempt to clear them which proved to be in vain as he rubbed more into them. Squinting he peered at the lean figure, barely standing up with laughter. He gasped.

"*Nymph?*"

It certainly looked like it was her. The girl stood before him, too thin to be natural, thick dark hair, matted and dirty, grey eyes sparkling with mirth and prominent cheek bones, most likely from not eating quite enough. She was short, not ridiculously so but enough for her height to be noticed, and her clothes hung off her loosely. She wore baggy jeans, stained with dirt and ripped in several places, amazingly (in the heat) a black jumper that zipped up the front, this too was ripped in

several places and too large for her, and heavy black boots that, although looking worse for the wear, appeared to be quite sturdy.

She was too breathless with laughter to answer. Grunting in annoyance, Harry climbed out of the lake, dripping. He glanced at the school and had to do a double take. The school! Dumbledore! The headmaster could be watching out of any one of the windows and they wouldn't be able to tell. There was no telling what he would do if he found out about Nymph never mind the fact that she was here – at Hogwarts!

Without wasting a second, Harry grabbed her by the arm and proceeded to run flat out towards the forest, which was thankfully only a few hundred metres away. Nymph had stopped her laughing in surprise and was being almost dragged the whole way as she tried desperately to find her feet enough to stop stumbling. Only when they were safely under the cover of the tall trees did he release her and collapse against a tree panting.

“Wha’ the bloody hell was tha’ for?” Nymph demanded of him before he could even barely feel relieved. She stood, hands on hips, eying him suspiciously.

“Dumbledore,” he panted. “Could have – been – watching.”

She cocked her head. “Gods ‘arry, paranoid much? You jumped ‘alf ou’ you’re skull when you ‘eard meh.”

“What’re ye doin’ ‘ere, Nymph?” he asked wearily. A better question might have been how but Harry thought that one could wait. It wasn't too important how important she had gotten there but the fact that she had. What was she doing here? Didn't she know how dangerous it was?

She frowned. “No even a ‘ello? Cawr, you’ve no manners ‘arry. No’ tha’ it’s any of *your* business, bu’ I came tae see you. I was right worried when you never turned up from the train. Fot them wizards ‘ad bumped you off, I did. So I comes up ‘ere, see? An’ I finds you and don’ even get no ‘ello.”

"Nymph," he groaned. It was all Dumbledore's fault really; if the old coot hadn't stopped Harry from leaving Hogwarts, Nymph would have never come and been in danger from, well, Dumbledore. "Don' ye know how dangerous you comin' here is?"

To his utmost horror, and surprise, she looked as if she might cry. She certainly sounded upset enough for it but it seemed she had decided to channel her ill feelings into anger. "I can' *believe* you, 'arry! You're so bloody selfish!"

Selfish? Of all the things she could have called him, selfish was not one he had expected. How was wanting to keep her safe being selfish?

"If I wants to put mysel' in danger, then I bloody well will! It's nothin' tae do wi' you! I am my own person an' if I wants to do somethin', you can' stop meh! It's *my* choice whether I goes into danger an' righ' now, I so choose! Besides," she continued in a much calmer, sly way. "If you make meh go away, you don' get no more potion an' you're stuck as 'arry Potter. No more Mr Nobody, eh?"

"Ah was hardly Mr Nobody," he muttered absent mindedly. What she said had merit, but was he really going to let her endanger herself? The way she was looking at him suggested that he didn't have an option...

"How comes? Wha' choo been up tae?"

He shook his head. "Nothin'." But she persisted. A lot. After five minutes of badgering he finally snapped, "Ah'll tell ye, when ye tell me how ye know so much 'bout magic an' that."

Now it was Nymph's turn to fervently refuse. It was odd, actually. What did she have to hide? She must have come from a wizarding family to know about magic but that didn't explain why she wasn't with them now. Perhaps he was prying too much, but his curiosity was spiked high. Eventually they lapsed into silence, staring at each other, when clearly neither was going to relent.

Harry took a deep breath. Dumbledore had gone ahead with his plans to replant newer trees in the place of the old, burnt to cinders, ones.

They didn't have quite the same feel to them. There was no strange allure of these ones. It was still present in the rest of the trees, oh yes, but it wasn't in these ones. Perhaps it was something that came with time.

What was he to do about Nymph? He needed to get her away from Dumbledore lest the old man get any crazy ideas, like usual, but how was he to do that when he couldn't leave the grounds himself? She was obviously too stubborn to just be persuaded to leave for the good of her own health. Harry knew her too well to even *attempt* that. Again.

So how was he to get her to leave then? The ideal option would be for him to leave with her and then they could go back to London, but that was hardly an option. He had tried to leave and he was pretty certain it was impossible. Dumbledore may have been a fool, but he was an intelligent fool.

Harry shook his head, half in amusement, half in despair. "Am not gettin' rid of ye, am I?" Nymph shook her head cheekily, a wide grin spreading across her face. "Ah guess am stuck with ye then, aren't ah? So what d'we do now?"

She blinked in surprise. She seemed to find something odd with this question. "We leave of course!" she exclaimed, as if this were the most obvious thing in the world.

"Ah can' leave, Nymph. Ah've tried but Dumbledore's got the place rigged good. He won' let me leave, not if he can help it an' he's doin' a good job of stoppin' me so far."

Amazingly, she just laughed. "Well there must be one thing ye haven' done, seeing that ye're still *here*."

If it were possible, Harry's eyes would have jumped out of his head in surprise. How could she, who had only just arrived, possibly know of a way in which he could escape when he had failed? Harry had tried and done everything he had thought of to get away – and there had certainly been more than a few things – and had still failed. If she did truly know a way to get out, he was never going to doubt her again.

No matter what it was, even if it involved him digging a tunnel with his bare hands, he would do it.

“What’s that?”

“The forest.”

Harry cursed Nymph to the very lowest level of Hell. Only she could get him into this kind of situation. He had been unable to persuade her that travelling through the forest was a bad idea. In fact, it was how she had arrived at Hogwarts in the first place. She had told him how she had “flooded” to Hogsmeade – which Harry knew as the name of the nearby village – and had then travelled some way out so that she could enter the forest at, what she claimed was, “an unsuspecting distance”. She had then walked the several miles of forest to Hogwarts. Harry had wondered what had possessed her to do so but finally decided that she was just crazy. After all, she expected them to take the same route back to Hogsmeade even though she could not remember the way.

It was more than a minor set-back that Harry neither had his wand nor could perform magic without risking being exposed. Of course, Nymph had found it highly amusing that he had his wand confiscated though he had neglected to tell her the reasons behind this. What was more irritating, however, was that this meant he could not use his wand to defend himself if the need arose. Which, of course, it had.

Harry peered cautiously over the edge of the branch of the tree that he was currently perched in. Nymph was similarly perched a few branches higher and laughing hysterically. It was still there. Down at the base of the tree was, what looked to be, half eagle, half horse. It had the head, wings and front legs of an eagle while its body, back legs and tail were those of a horse. The *thing* had been scratching its head against a tree when Nymph, unfortunately, had been the first to spot it.

“Cawr ‘arry! Look a’ tha’ ugly thing!” she had proclaimed. This had then caused the bird – no horse – *thing* to whip its head towards her and charge in what was unmistakably an attack. In terror and pure instinct, they had bolted up the nearest tree to escape the rampaging creature. What they had neglected to realise, however, was the fact that the creature could actually *use* its wings to *fly*. Luckily for them, the creature was so large in proportions that it couldn’t avoid the large branches that surrounded the duo and so could not reach them.

Unluckily for them, the creature was by no means unintelligent and had taken up the base of the tree as its new home, waiting for them. Consequently, Harry did not think it a good idea that they leave the safety of the tree before the bird-horse was long gone.

Nymph swung upside down from her branch by her legs so that she was face to face with Harry. "Ah've always wanted tae sleep in a tree, 'aven' you?"

He stared at her. Unlike any sane person, she wasn't worried about the angry creature lurking at the bottom of the tree, oh no. No what was on her mind was how much she'd always wanted to sleep in a tree. Batty, absolutely batty. "No... well, no. 'Sides that, ah've already slept in one."

Frowning petulantly, which looked very odd upside down with the blood rushing to her head, she asked, "When've you 'ad a kip in a tree? No, wait, why wasn' *ah* invi'ed?"

Like he thought, completely batty. He sighed; now was as good as any other time to tell her at least a little about how he had escaped from Hogwarts before. "When ah was runnin' away from batman an' merlin before. Ah didn' think it was, well, safe tae sleep on the ground and now ye see why."

It looked as if Nymph were trying to let her mouth fall open in surprise but the change in gravity made it look very peculiar. " 'old up, 'arry. Ye came through the fores' *before* ye say? What the hell? An' ye didn' tell meh this because... oh ah see." She flipped down to his branch and straddled it. "Ye don' trust me! Ye *still* don' trust me! Well, fine, if tha's how ye are, I guess ah'll be leavin'."

To Harry's horror, she swung her leg over the side of the branch and prepared to jump. Just as she pushed off he grabbed her by the wrist, suspending her in mid air, the ground ten feet below her. Forcing himself not to look at the ground and the dizzying height, he focused on her face.

"Nymph! What about *it*? Are ye crazy?" Well, okay, so he needn't have asked the last question; the answer was rather obvious. Frowning and using strength Harry did not know she possessed,

Nymph grabbed his wrist in hers and proceeded to climb up his arm using only her hands and arms until she was high enough to grab hold of the branch and scramble onto it again.

“Actually, ah don’ wan’ tae leave. This is *ma* tree. *You* leave.” She glared at him, attempting to act as though this was what she had intended all along and that she hadn’t forgotten about the great horse of a bird that had risen to its feet in anticipation when it saw her jump.

“Nymph,” Harry said in his most calming of voices. “It’s no that an’ if ye’d refrain from jumpin’ out the tree long enough to listen, ah’ll tell ye.” Holding onto her just in case she deemed it necessary to vacate the tree again, he told her how he had run away from Madam Pomfrey, dashed through the trees, encountered a werewolf, met a centaur, had his arm amputated and *walked* – he had to repeat himself multiple times here – back to London. He neglected to tell her about Sir, however. Crazy as she was, he knew that not even Nymph would think him perfectly sane for hearing voices no one else could hear. Needless to say, she was gaping by the end of his tale.

“Cawr ‘arry! Anythin’ else ye wanna share with meh? When we come back tae ‘ogwarts next year, ah’ll find out anyway so ye might as well tell me now.”

Harry snorted. Trust Nymph to be thinking to the end of summer rather than when they would finally get out of the tree. Wait, had she said...? Surely not. “When we come back tae Hogwarts, Nymph?”

She grinned in what Harry thought was supposed to be an innocent look. It wasn’t. “Now ‘arry, ah know that ye wouldn’ let me come las’ year but this time ye can’. *This* year ah’m coming whether ye like it or not. *This* year I have a *letter*.”

He blinked at her. A letter? What good could that possibly do anyone? Perhaps it was some magic letter that would transport her from one place to another. It could be the letter “P” for portkey or “H” for Hogwarts. There had to be something significant about it, otherwise she would not have mentioned it. “Erm, good for you? What letter might this be; A or B or C or -?”

“Don’ be a goon. ‘ere.” It took ten minutes of searching her person to find the letter. As she went she removed things and forced them upon Harry to hold. This included seven knives – how or why she managed to keep that many upon her was a mystery – a bouncy ball, what appeared to be a cat collar, a sock – not even a pair of socks, just *one* – a *plug*, three playing cards, several scraps of paper, a spoon, a couple of batteries and a toy fish. Finally, from within her left boot, the letter was extracted.

Taking the distinctly crumpled piece of parchment from her, Harry began to read it. “Dear Miss – Nymph did you *scratch* yer name out? No nevermind, I don’ want tae know. We are pleased tae inform ye that ye have a place at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft an’ Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books an’ equipment. Term begins on September first. We await yer owl by no later than thirty-first of July. Hey, how come *you* got a letter an’ I didn’?”

“ ‘Cause ah stayed in one place long enough for them tae have an address to send it too.” Nymph looked at him as if this were the most obvious thing in the world. “An’ ye can’ stop meh going neither ‘cause I already sent back the owl.”

It looked like there really was no way to stop her going. Harry had tried to keep her safe from Dumbledore, truly he had. He had stopped her going the year before but this year she was taking matters into her own hands. It was not his choice what she did, he knew, but he still wanted to at least *try* and stop Nymph putting herself in harms way, which happened surprisingly often. She was the sort of person that would go up to random people in the street and punch them for no apparent reason. It was just who she was.

Nevertheless, Harry could not resist one last futile attempt to stop her going. “Ye’d have to get all yer stuff though...” As expected, Nymph quickly shot this argument down by telling him that she had already gotten everything she would need for the upcoming school year and even had she not, she could have just taken his old stuff. Harry sighed. It appeared Nymph was coming to Hogwarts. Again.

After carefully handing Nymph her belongs back, which she stashed away in their various hiding places, he peered over the edge of the

tree again to check if the horse-bird was still there. For a moment, Harry thought it was. There was still a large shape at the base of the tree with horse legs, but this time the front legs were also a horses and the being had the torso of a man. It was Jacques.

As though he felt Harry's eyes upon him, Jacques looked up. "Hello again, Harry Potter. You failed to bring me the Philosopher's Stone."

"Yeah, ah know but ah did try an' it wasn' my fault –"

"Through your actions the stone was removed from the school and destroyed. That was my intention so I consider your debt paid, Harry Potter. In return, I have dismissed the Hippogriff from your presence. We are acquitted with each other."

Relief at his burden finally being lifted from him flooded Harry. It was not enough to stop his curiosity, however. "Who are you? Why do you help me?" he blurted out, not really paying much attention to being polite – not that he had ever succeeded in that aspect.

To his surprise Jacques smiled serenely and gave an – approving? – nod of his head. "I am someone you know both well and not at all. One day you will understand though I fear not any time soon. Farewell, Harry Potter." At the blink of an eye, Jacques was gone.

Harry turned back to Nymph only to find that she was staring at him, open mouthed, looking fearful. What had brought this on? Sure Jacques was an impressive being but he had never given off the air of frightening, at least not to Harry. Although, perhaps the reason Harry had never found him frightening was because nearly every appearance of the centaur had resulted in his being helped. Or maybe it was just horses that scared her. After all, they had just been attacked by a bird-horse (Hippogriff, had Jacques called it?).

"'arry," Nymph said, her voice quivering. "Who were you talkin' to?"

In surprise, Harry felt his grip on the tree slip and he slid off the branch before even registering that his mouth was open. The ground rushed towards him in a flash of colour and he hit it hard, pain shooting up his arm and through his stomach where he had landed.

With a groan, he rolled over so that he could faintly see Nymph's head peering anxiously over the side of the tree.

How could she not know who he had been talking to? Or heard Jacques? Jacques had a voice that seemed to carry itself far and wide with no effort involved and it was hard to miss. Nymph must have looked to see who he was talking to, so how had she not seen? How could she have missed the great being that was Jacques?

Harry groaned to the forest, both out of pain and desperation. It seemed that not only did he hear a voice that no one else could hear, he now saw and conversed with centaurs that didn't exist. And to top of that, he had just fallen ten metres out of a tree. It was going to be a long summer indeed.

xXxXxX

Dumbledore removed his half-moon glasses and placed his head in his hands. How could it have happened again? How? It simply did not make any sense and, forgive his lack of modesty, most things that would not make sense to the general public did make sense to him. This, however, was a mystery.

He had placed wards, tracking charms, prevention spells and countless others upon Harry and *still* the boy had managed to run away again! It was puzzling. Harry did not have his wand so, theoretically, he would have been unable to remove any such spells that Dumbledore had placed on him. In fact, any normal wizard would have had trouble removing the spells; that was how complex they were. Yet young Harry had done it, on just his twelfth birthday no less.

Dumbledore checked his drawer in his desk. Yes, the wand was still there. So how had it been done? He had been at the Ministry for Magic sorting out some affairs when one of Hogwarts's wards had gone off, alerting him that an unauthorised person had somehow managed to bypass the other spells and restrictions and enter the grounds. This in itself was peculiar. When he had arrived back at Hogwarts the person had left, along with Harry. After some investigation it was clear that no spells had been used on the wards.

His first priority had, of course, been to locate the boy and after this had proved futile, he had scoured the grounds himself. Hagrid would normally have been enlisted to help him but the gamekeeper was still in St. Mungo's being treated for some wounds inflicted by his dragon. When it was absolutely certain that Harry had somehow left Hogwarts, Dumbledore had gone straight to the forest to search. The trouble was, many creatures had not yet adapted to the new trees on the outskirts of the forest and it was so vast that no creature he asked had seen Harry or anyone else. After several hours of searching with no leads whatsoever, he had had to give up.

There was no proof that Harry had even entered the forest, though Dumbledore could not fathom another way he might have gone. He had been certain that Harry would not dare venture into the forest again, not after the wolf or werewolf (it was debatable which) had attacked him. Perhaps this was one of those seldom times that he was wrong.

The other person to have entered Hogwarts bothered him greatly too. Hogwarts was supposed to be impenetrable; why else was it the believed the safest place in Britain? The fact that someone had entered, left and possibly taken Harry with them was startling, especially when Dumbledore didn't have the faintest clue what had occurred. He believed, however, that the two must have left together. The timings were too coincidental to suppose otherwise. That left the question of, "Had Harry left willingly or been forced to?" Since the young boy was incapable of removing Dumbledore's charms, this other person must have done so which meant they had to be a powerful witch or wizard indeed. That too, was worrying.

The fear that Harry had allied himself with a disreputable person was growing within him. Who else would infiltrate Hogwarts and take the boy? No matter the circumstances, Harry was in danger. If he had left willingly, it might have been with questionable company and even if it hadn't, there were still those who would gladly harm him. If he had left unwillingly, it could be disastrous. Even through his forlorn musings, Dumbledore could not help but be hit by the irony of the situation. By keeping Harry at Hogwarts, he had hoped to avoid this type of situation.

Hopefully Harry would return in September for the new school year, if not sooner. Dumbledore would organise a discreet search, of course, but with the lack of success in similar searches for the boy in the past, he was beginning to doubt an optimistic outcome. He found himself wishing that Harry had indeed run away of his own accord.

After Jacques's visit, escaping the Forbidden Forest was relatively simple. First, Harry had to convince Nymph that he was just musing to himself, not going insane. If he told her what he had really seen – and been conversing with – she would not understand. How could she? He would be sceptical himself if he learnt that it were she that saw centaur's who were not there and heard people who did not exist. Harry was sure they were real though; his arm was proof of that. Jacques must have had some charm or something on to prevent anyone from Harry knowing he was there. Yes, that had to be it, didn't it?

Another thing of which Harry was sure, was that there had to be a reason that he was *not* crazy. Despite what he must have appeared to Nymph, he wasn't. There had to be a reason Jacques talked to him and him only; he just didn't know what it was.

Thankfully, they met no more Hippogriffs or anything terribly dangerous. Though, they did encounter a vicious group of what looked like wooden pixies that were living in a tree and were most... *displeased* to be disturbed, some suspicious looking fungi and the corpse of a fearsome looking beast. The only thing remotely frightening about the corpse was the thought of what had been able to kill it. Nevertheless, Harry and Nymph made it through the forest and to the village of Hogsmeade with no more than a few small scratches and bite marks.

It was the next day by the time they arrived at Hogsmeade (the route they took through the forest had a few... *detours*). Nymph planned to borrow – well, *steal* – some floo powder out of the Three Broomsticks, which was a nearby pub, and floo to London where they were both familiar with their surroundings. Five minutes upon entering the town, however, Nymph dragged Harry into a back alley, looking worried.

"There's wizards scoutin' the place for you, but I think they're thick as slugs since they've not snatched you yet," she said in a hushed tone at his questioning look. "Dumbledore must've sent 'em out tae look for you. Shut up a mo and let me speak." She had seen him open his

mouth to comment. Harry closed it with a snap. "The pub's right round the corner so just be real inconspicuous and we'll be fine."

It was not even worth the effort to wonder how Nymph knew the meaning of inconspicuous. It seemed rather pointless, too, that she had dragged him into a shadowy alley if she wanted to remain so. If there was anything less inconspicuous than two figures whispering quietly in a dark corner, it did not come to mind.

Even so, they exited the alley through the way they had entered. Now that he knew to look for them, Harry could see wizards and witches dotted over the town attempting to look casual whilst leaning against walls. They were doing a pretty bad job of it. One wizard in particular was simply standing in the middle of the street inspecting passers-by. Harry wondered how he had not noticed these blatant watch guards before, especially since he used to be able to spot a much better hidden lookout with ease. He put it down to lack of practise.

As the pair rounded the corner, the Three Broomsticks came into view. It seemed they would make it after all, though how was a mystery. Surely one of the wizards must have noticed two less than clean children walking around with various stains and evidence of travelling through the forest? Apparently not and no one even commented as they entered the pub, which was half full. It took a few minutes for Harry to be able to see properly in the dimmer light but when he did he could see that the pub had a cosy atmosphere to it and the occupants were talking amiably, some intimately, others boisterously. Trying to look as though they were searching for a table to sit at, the pair drifted over to the fireplace which had a pot of sand-like substance atop of it.

Nymph took a handful of the sand and instructed Harry to the same. He complied and she whispered instructions on how to use this sand to travel through the fire, all the while eyes darting round the pub for any onlookers. Grinning that they were about to be free at last from the threat of capture, she stepped into the fireplace to go first and disappeared with a few words in a flash of green flames.

At the sound of the flames, the witch serving drinks looked over, anger clearly evident on her face. "What do you think you're doing?"

she demanded, depositing the tray that she had been holding on a nearby table and drawing her wand in an instant. "Get away from there!"

A wizard much closer to Harry at a table, got up and drew his wand also. Apparently this wizard thought he would assist the employee by attempting to stun him. Harry was not amused. To avoid the spell, he had to dive away from the fireplace and take cover behind a witch sitting drinking a tankard of some sweet substance. This violent action drew the attention of other customers and before he knew it, nearly every occupant in the room had their wands drawn and were firing spells at him. This commotion apparently alarmed passers-by outside and soon they too had entered the pub and were attempting to fire spells at Harry.

Staying still was not an option, he decided as he dove behind a chair only to be fired at from behind and forced to roll away. Now he was on the opposite end of the room from the fireplace though he was not entirely sure how he had gotten there. There was a steady stream of spells being directed at him now. Running and ducking simultaneously, Harry knocked over an elderly woman, taking her umbrella from her as he went. He yelped in pain when a stinging hex or something similar hit his ankle. Ignoring the pain, he opened the umbrella and used it as a make-shift shield to block the main body of curses. He was slightly closer to the fireplace now but he had dropped the floor powder in his second dive.

Harry vaulted over the bar, discarding the smoking frame of the umbrella as he went, and heard glass smash overhead where he had been just a second before. Spells were sent flying at the bottles and glassware suspended above him as magical folk aimed aimlessly at where they thought he might reappear. The glass shattered and rained down upon him but Harry ignored it. He ran crouched out of view along the length of the bar and jumped over the top of it at the end, swiftly upturning a table as he landed to block the jelly-legs curse that followed him. He ducked the curse that attacked him from the other side and propelled himself into its caster. Snatching the wand that rolled away, he fired random bursts of magic in all directions as he twisted out the way of a yellow spell. The wand

omitted violent beams of fire instead of the stunning spell Harry had intended. That's what he got for attempting to use another's wand.

Harry jumped onto a table, flinging the tray he had picked up at an unsuspecting witch. He hopped over a multitude of spells that shot towards his feet and flung himself upon a wizard, not once breaking stride. If he stayed still for even a second he knew he would be hit with more than the few stinging hexes and singeing curses that had found their home already.

The fireplace was only a few more yards away and the way was clear. He dove the last few paces, ending in a forwards roll. As he straightened, he jumped to avoid yet another spell and grabbed some more floo powder at the same time. Barely stopping the shout his destination, he flung himself into the fireplace and ducked again.

As he ducked, the world began spinning around him in a whirl of green flames and fireplaces. He spluttered and coughed as he inhaled soot from the air and fell over when he tried to get to his feet. Harry continued to spin, limbs flailing all over the place and hitting fireplaces as they span by. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the world slowed its rotation and he half fell, half rolled, out of a fire place and landed at Nymph's feet.

"Took your time," she sniffed uninterestedly. "What were you doing, polishing the floors?"

From his position on the floor, Harry told her, breathing heavily, of what had happened. He stamped at some smoke that was rising from his trousers where a spell had hit him and blinked in surprise at Nymph who was looking most put out.

"How comes you always do all the fun stuffs without me? You could have called me back!"

Harry spluttered indignantly at her. Called her back? *Called her back?* Didn't she realise he had been a little preoccupied with not being turned into a crab? Honestly, he couldn't really be expected to call her back when he was in the midst of a single sided battle. "Tae be honest, makin' sure you got tae have a bit of fun wasn't top of my priorities list."

“Well next time, make it! I won’t have you gettin’ to do all the fun stuffs without me this year at Hogwarts. So how much fun did you have without me last year?” She plopped herself down onto the dusty wooden floor beside Harry who still had not moved since he had tumbled out of the fireplace.

He thought about all he had done in his time at Hogwarts. He had given Ron the concussion, broken Malfoy’s nose, knocked someone off their broom to escape from the crazy Bludger, saved Hermione from the troll, there was that *incident* with the Weasley twins and he had attempted to steal the Philosopher’s Stone. “Not much,” he muttered. Harry turned to look at the room. It was bare except for the fireplace and the whole room was covered in a thick layer of dust that was only disturbed by a set of footprints that looked suspiciously like Nymph’s. “Where are we?”

She brightened at this and smiled proudly. “*This* is a wizarding home that was abandoned at Christmas. Dunno why but it’s pretty damn helpful when you want to get around by floo.” They lapsed into silence for a few minutes, each mind wandering aimlessly.

“So where we off tae? We can’t stay ‘round here all summer,” Harry asked, breaking the silence. Truth be told, he didn’t even know where “here” was other than it was in London.

The girl beside him gave a feral grin. “Want to play dares?”

Harry frowned at her. Dares? She wanted to play *dares* all summer? Sure, the game had been fun when they were bored but the game soon became dull as the creative dares were used up. It grew old very quickly when every second dare was one that had already been performed by someone else. His scepticism must have shown on his face as Nymph quickly explained, the feral grin remaining in place.

“Dares in Diagon Alley. With wizards in play it’s so much more fun!”

Now Harry just gaped at her. Wizards could use spells which were much harder to avoid than the occasional – well more than occasional – angry pedestrian. “Erm, maybe later in the summer when thing’s have died down a bit, eh?” Hopefully by that time she would have forgotten about the idea.

"I'll hold you to that, 'arry." Nymph cocked her head in thought. "How 'bout we meet up with some of the old gang? I know there's more than one person who wants to go a round with you. There were a lot of really disappointed people when you left, you know."

By "go a round" Nymph meant there were more than a few people who were eager to have a friendly fight with Harry. With no money to buy amusements with, the common form of such was to have fights which were entertaining for not only the participants but the spectators as well. Before the whole fiasco with Snape, Harry had been exceptionally good at fighting for his size. He was fairly convinced his magic helped him see punches and attacks coming and helped his reaction speeds, though he had never voiced this theory. Now, however, he was severely out of practise and was most likely not on top form.

"I dunno, Nymph," he said, uncertainly. "I've not had a decent fight in forever; I'm probably as bad as when I first got into a fight again."

The feral grin was back on her face. Harry wondered briefly if she actually had any other smile. "Then you'd better start practising again! Practise makes perfect, after all."

He grinned cheekily at her. "But nobody's perfect, so why bother?"

To Harry's surprise, she seemed highly affronted by this. "How!" she exclaimed, in an offended tone. "*I'm* perfect!"

Snorting in amusement, he replied condescendingly, "Of course you are."

After half an hour of arguing, Nymph managed to bully Harry into agreeing to a couple of fights with those he had been friends with before. Amazingly, despite his absence, he was still talked about, mostly because of his "invincible" fighting skills. This made Harry all the more nervous. He really was incredibly out of practise. Hogwarts hadn't provided the same kind of practise that had occurred every day while Harry had been living on the streets.

When the duo had arrived at the home of the gang that Nymph had been a part of, they had been greeted with surprised yelps and

shouts. The place was unfamiliar to Harry but as he had suspected, the gang had moved in the year he had been away. It also appeared that Nymph had been missing from the gang for numerous months and it had been feared that she had been caught by the police. She remained as tight-lipped about her disappearance as Harry was about his. Later when they were alone, she still refused to answer where she had been.

Nymph had, it transpired, understated the amount of people who wanted to fight Harry, just to see if they could win. To Harry it seemed like nearly every person present wanted to fight him, including some he had never met. In the end, he ended up obliging everyone. As soon as he finished one fight, Nymph would badger him until he agreed to someone else.

Overall, he didn't do too badly. He didn't *lose*, which was surprising and comforting at the same time. It meant he wasn't completely defenceless, even without his wand. Knives were not used nor any weapon that would seriously injure someone such as a gun. The occasional wooden bat or similar instrument was used though. Harry managed to pin everyone who fought him into submission, escaping with only a bleeding lip and nose, multiple bruises and cuts and a black eye.

That night was spent laughing and drinking with old friends and swapping absurd tales of events that had transpired over the last year. Harry mainly listened to these tales, not have many ones that were suitable to tell, as did Nymph. Nymph's silence was strange. Where had she been? What had she been doing? Harry was determined to find out and when he was determined to do something, it usually got done.

It was an extremely enjoyable affair. There was no worry here, no constant threat. Of course, there was always the underlying thought of the police finding them but it was obviously far from most people's minds. The atmosphere was relaxed and carefree, something Harry had not experienced in those he actually *liked* in a long time. That was the way he liked it and he wished it could stay that way.

But he had to go back. Harry knew he did; there was no avoiding it. Just by being there he was probably endangering them. He would not do that to them, not when they were so content living peacefully – if you could call it that.

His mind kept wandering to what would happen at the end of the summer. What would Dumbledore think when he saw him return with Nymph? He might demand an explanation to where he'd been and to who Nymph was. Harry didn't have any idea what he would tell him. He would lie, most likely, but he had yet to come up with a good story that might sound even somewhat plausible. He could refuse to answer at all though Dumbledore would probably continue to pester him until he said something.

What house would Nymph be sorted into? She was brave, no doubt about that, but she was also plenty cunning when she wanted to be. She had never struck Harry as a particularly hard-working or patient, so Hufflepuff was an unlikely choice. Ravenclaw seemed improbable, too. Nymph was not really the sort for learning. That meant it was most-likely a choice between Gryffindor and Slytherin but Harry could not decide on which suited Nymph better.

What would the year have in store for them? Harry doubted that it could possibly be as eventful as his first year but he also doubted that he would ever be left alone completely by the ever so twitchy student body. Nymph would probably ignore any attempts he made to allow her to be seen as an average student. She tended to alter any such opinions by simply being her. She would disregard his advice about staying away from him to protect herself from Dumbledore too, not that he wouldn't still give it. Hogwarts didn't strike Harry as a particularly uneventful place. No, this year was probably going to be just as eventful as the previous.

Harry stared down at the busy bustle of witches and wizards below him. Unfortunately, Nymph *hadn't* forgotten the idea of playing dares in Diagon Alley. It seemed it had been an idea of hers that she had been itching to do for months. He had managed to keep her away from forcing him to participate in the game for two whole weeks before she would have no more of it and petulantly bullied him into it.

The day after they had returned to London, Nymph had acquired the Daily Prophet, the wizarding newspaper, (Harry didn't even want to think how) and it had amused them greatly to find that Harry's escapade in the Three Broomsticks was in it. The article had detailed how a "young hooligan" had purposely stirred up trouble by attacking innocent customers. There was no mention of Nymph. The picture, thankfully, did not show Harry but rather the destruction left in the pub. Glass was shattered everywhere and there was not a table, chair or beverage left standing. The fireplace had suffered the worst damage; during Harry's escape, the multitude of witches and wizards had all fired spells at it and it had thus collapsed inwards leaving only a pile of bricks.

In the process of keeping Nymph away from Diagon Alley to play dares, Harry had ended up fighting everyone either of them knew and even some people they didn't. Multiple times. It had taken quite a number of days to track down various hide-outs of different gangs and factions. In the end, Harry felt much more confident in his fighting abilities again than when he had first returned. Perhaps the only person he hadn't fought against at least once was Nymph. For some reason she stayed out of the fights against him. Perhaps she thought she stood no chance against him or thought it would affect their friendship.

Whenever they had met others for Harry to fight, the pair had ended up spending the day with them talking amiably of what they had done since their last meeting. Though he knew it was dangerous for them to be talking to him, Harry quite enjoyed catching up with old acquaintances.

Another thing Harry ended up doing to avoid playing dares in Diagon Alley was to play the game in the muggle world. News of Harry and Nymph's intentions spread, however, and the game ended up with not only themselves but thirty-two others as well. It was the largest game Harry had ever participated in. The first round was filled with mundane things, such as hugging the first brunette that came into sight or stealing a fish bowl, but by the time the second round began, all the mundane dares had been used and they grew more outlandish. By the time the fifth round began, there were only fifteen left playing. The others had failed their dares or refused them and so the numbers were significantly smaller. It actually took several days for the game to end; a girl named Trix was the only one to successfully complete her dare which involved her stealing a car, somehow getting it to the top of a ten story building and pushing it off the roof. It wasn't really clear how she managed it...

And so, it was the last week of the holidays before Harry ran out of... amusing activities to keep Nymph entertained with. They had done everything imaginable from sneaking into the cinema to throwing water balloons off buildings of great height in attempts to soak those below.

"Right, 'arry," Nymph declared from their spot in an unobtrusive alley. Harry thought it was rather odd that there were small alleys off Diagon *Alley* but considering their reason for being there, he chose not to comment. "You can go first 'cause it were my idea. Your round one dare is... to swipe someone's hat."

He blinked at her. That was all? No drop a wizard down a hole? Not that he was complaining... He smirked. "Piece of cake."

Leading the way back into the main alley, Harry inspected passers-by for a suitable candidate. He walked innocently forwards until he was alongside a short wizard with a short grey beard and greying hair. Without breaking stride, Harry tapped the wizard on the shoulder away from him so that the wizard turned his back to him. With a well practised movement (and still without breaking stride), Harry lightly took the hat from his head – so lightly that it took the confused wizard a moment to realise it was missing, by which point Harry had already walked away with the hat hidden in his clothes.

Back in the alley, he presented the hat to Nymph with a grin. "That wasn't even slightly hard."

She sneered at him good naturedly. "Beginner's luck. You got a better one?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. Your round one dare is to get someone to buy you – willingly – some ice-cream." She gave him an unimpressed look and walked out of the alley.

Harry watched in fascination from the side as Nymph walked up to the ice-cream parlour where several families were examining the menu of bizarre wizarding flavours. She pretended to look at it too and then her expression changed from interested to sad and forlorn. She sighed pathetically.

"Oh they all look so wonderful! I wish I had money with me to buy one..."

He had to admit, as a kindly old gentleman bought her a Starry Sorceress's Swirl, that she was a good actress. She returned to him after an exclamation of "Oh thank you, kind sir!" with her ice-cream, a triumphant grin on her face.

"As you says, 'arry, piece of cake." She gave the ice-cream a lick. "Your second round dare is to... go into the bank and get some money."

Suddenly he found himself wishing she would go back to the simple stealing of a hat but he knew he had to at least attempt the dare or she would probably throw a fit. Dares was a game Nymph took very seriously indeed.

Licking his lips in anticipation, Harry made his way towards the bank, balking slightly as he saw a sinister warning against thieves. That was one option out. There was no chance that he was about to cross someone who put that as their welcoming message. Inside was a giant marble hall filled with, what looked to be, goblins, nearly all sitting at a long counter weighing coins, examining precious stones and writing in ledgers. They were eerie creatures and looked every bit as sinister as their message. He left Nymph at the door, happily

licking her ice-cream, and almost burst into laughter as he caught a goblin speak to her.

“Are you in need of assistance, miss?”

“Nah, just waiting on me friend,” was the chirpy reply.

What amused Harry, however, was what he heard the goblin whisper to a couple of its companions. “Keep an eye on that one; she looks like trouble.”

On his own, he approached a free goblin at the counter, nerves twisting and writhing in his stomach. The formidable creature turned a beady eye on him and stared coldly until Harry spoke. “Erm, yeah, hi,” he said awkwardly. “I’d like to make a withdrawal.”

“Mr Potter,” the goblin said, with a glance up to his forehead where Harry knew his scar might just be visible through his hair if one looked closely. “Do you have your key?”

“Heh?” Key? What key? Generally speaking, a key opened a lock but what this lock was on, Harry had no idea. He had no money in Gringotts; he’d never had much money, full stop. But why would the goblin ask for a key if there was not a vault to accompany it? Impossible, that would mean his parents would have had a vault and Aunt Petunia would have said something about it. Unless she didn’t know about it...

Dumbledore. Dumbledore would have known if Harry had a vault with money and surely Dumbledore’s mind didn’t twist enough that he would keep hidden something that would keep him well fed. Then again, it was Dumbledore.

“I shall assume then, that you do *not* have your key, Mr Potter?” the goblin said stonily when Harry did not say anything more. He nodded dumbly. Well, he *didn’t* have a key. Even if it didn’t exist, he still didn’t have it. “Well then, sign here –” from the air the goblin produced a piece of parchment filled with writing in a curvy writing that Harry couldn’t read. “- and a new key will be presented to you. If you are not, in fact, Mr Potter, I should warn you that... adverse affects should occur if you sign.”

Taking the quill that was offered, Harry scribbled his signature at the bottom where indicated. He didn't have anything to fear; he was himself. It was just a little peculiar that he should need to sign to be told that he did not have an account.

To his surprise, the goblin nodded after examining the parchment and produced a gold key, again from the air, and handed it to him. "Griphook will escort you down to your vault, Mr Potter."

"Heh?" Harry reiterated. He barely had time to call Nymph over before another goblin came and escorted them into a small, narrow stone passageway that was lit by torches along the walls. At Griphook's whistle, a cart came hurtling along to greet them. The ride down reminded Harry strongly of a roller coaster ride he had been on shortly before Aunt Petunia had been murdered. He and Nymph thoroughly enjoyed the ride down to his vault but when they disembarked, Griphook appeared slightly disgruntled at their whoops of joy during the ride. The goblin opened the enormous door to the vault using Harry's key and revealed mounds upon mounds of coins.

"Whoa, 'arry, you lucky son of a –" Nymph began but she was cut off by a stream of profanity that Harry directed towards Dumbledore. He *knew*. Dumbledore *knew* about the mountains of gold that awaited Harry and he never said anything! Sometimes he wondered if it was Dumbledore's mission in life to make him loath him as much as possible.

Once back in the open in Diagon Alley again, with considerable piles of gold in their pockets, Harry and Nymph found that they had nothing on which to spend the money. They had already stolen all the supplies Nymph would need for Hogwarts and Harry's were still at the castle. Their stomachs were well accustomed to not eating much. There were only a few days left of the summer holidays and they had agreed to spend it with some friends. It was odd, but now that Harry had the money he had so desperately wanted at times, he found he had no use for it. In the end, the pair returned most of it to Harry's vault in case someone tried to steal it. That was what they told themselves. In actual fact, the pair wanted to have another ride in the cart.

After they had emerged (again) into the dazzling sunlight that had befallen Diagon Alley, Nymph insisted that they continue the game of dares. It was her turn. Harry was rather stuck for ideas that he could make her do. Following several minutes of thought he settled for the good old "Punch the first blonde person you see in the face" dare.

She was only too happy to comply; this was one of her favourite dares. In a matter of seconds she had located a boy with blonde hair, tapped him on the shoulder and punched him – hard – on the nose. The boy fell over backwards in surprise but swiftly got to his feet and drew his wand. It was Malfoy and he was advancing on her, looking well and ready to use his wand.

Without really thinking about what he was doing, Harry propelled himself forwards and bowled Malfoy over from the side. They landed together on the ground with a light *oomph* sound.

"Run, Nymph!" Harry gasped from his position on top of Malfoy. She didn't need telling twice, which was a first. Before Malfoy had even thrust Harry off him, she was gone.

"What the hell do you think you're doing White?" he demanded as soon as he had gotten to his feet and begun brushing off his robes. He glanced at Harry. "Wait you're not White... you have his hair though..."

Mentally, Harry cursed his black hair that still retained the green highlights that had resulted from the Weasley twins attempted prank. It seemed that particular spell was there to stay. "Erm, yeah... it's all the rage in, erm, Germany."

Malfoy frowned at him. "You *are* White, aren't you? You're under a glamour charm."

What should he say? He could deny it, but that wasn't very effective. His hair really was a big give away. After all, who would just *happen* to have the exact same hair? It was helpful that Malfoy had the glamour backwards though. Maybe he could get away with admitting it.

“Yeah,” he sighed, at last. Absentmindedly, he ran a hand through the fated hair. “I am. Listen, I have to go. See you at school.” Harry darted quickly after Nymph, not waiting for Malfoy to answer and missing his wide eyes.

It took several more rounds of the game before Nymph finally consented to finishing it. Fortunately there were no major mishaps, though Nymph did get chased down the alley by a group of vicious pixies.

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The last few remaining days before they due to return to Hogwarts passed all to quickly for Harry’s liking. Though he knew he had to return to learn so that he could defend himself and extract his revenge on Dumbledore, he didn’t have to like it. In actual fact, he was dreading the moment when he met the old fool again; Dumbledore would be most anxious to know where he had been for sure.

So it was on their last night of the holidays that Harry was surprised when Nymph informed him that there was something she needed to do. On her own. No amount of questioning or coaxing enticed her to reveal where she wanted to go or why. It felt a little unjust to Harry; after all, *she* never let *him* out of *her* sight, so why should he be expected to? Once he had seen how futile his protests were, he ended up letting her go. He then followed her stealthily.

Nymph, as if suspecting he might do something like he was, did a very good job of attempting to lose any stalkers. She got on a bus, then a train, then another train, another bus, ran round the same block *three times* and proceeded to travel at a fast pace through many twists, turns and bends. She did indeed do a very good job of attempting to lose him (not that she was certain he was there) but Harry was an even better tracker than she was. By the time Nymph had reached her destination (a house, that looked as normal as any of the similar ones that the street was filled with), however, Harry wasn’t entirely sure where they were.

The girl in question glanced in paranoia from side to side up the street before approaching the door of the house. Harry smirked from

his hiding place (he was crouched behind some bushes); he was positive she had no idea that he was there. As the door to the house opened and closed once Nymph was inside, Harry half crouched, half ran to duck down beside the window of the room that had just flicked its lights on, knowing that he might just be able to hear the conversation within. True enough, he was able to make out the murmurs of conversation and, if he listened carefully, he could decipher most of what was being said.

“Have you got it?” That was unmistakably Nymph’s voice, but what was it after? What could the inhabitants of this house possibly have that Nymph wanted?

“Yes, yes, here it is. Do you remember our deal?” This was the voice of a female that sounded to be in adulthood. Who was it? They obviously knew Nymph and had met her before if they had arranged a “deal”. They must have met her at least before August; Nymph had been with him since then.

“Yes,” Nymph sounded thoroughly exasperated, as if this had been gone over many times. “I’ll see you in the holidays.”

“There’s a good girl,” a male voice placated. “Are you sure you don’t want to stay with us? It has to be better than wherever you’re staying at the moment.”

“Where I stay has nothing to do with you! It’s *my* choice!” Nymph sounded angry, more so than Harry had heard her in a while. “I wouldn’t stay with *you* if we were the last three people on earth!”

Now he was thoroughly confused. What had these people given Nymph and why had they struck a deal that said she had to meet them during the holidays? It shouldn’t concern them what Nymph did with her life or where she stayed. It was her life, she could lead it however she chose.

“Calm yourself, Nymph. He meant no offence; you know we-“ At that particular moment a car drove noisily past and Harry missed what was said by the woman, only Nymph’s disgruntled response.

“If that was true, we wouldn’t be talkin’ about this. Now *good bye*.”

Footsteps sounded from within as Nymph in her sturdy boots walked swiftly to the front door, yanked it open and slammed it behind her as she left. Knowing that this strange mystery would not be solved unless she explained it to him, Harry announced his presence by catching up with her as she stormed down the street. As he expected, she was not pleased to see him.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded at once, after putting away the knife that she had drawn, obviously thinking he was an attacker. “I told you not to come!”

“I wanted to know what you were up to,” he said, truthfully. He didn’t think it was particularly wise to anger her further when she was in this type of mood. “Who were those people?”

She narrowed her eyes at him, distrustfully. “What did you hear?”

Giving her a sympathetic glance, he replied, “Pretty much everything.”

Nymph sighed and the anger fell from her face to be replaced with a dejected look. They had arrived at a small children’s play park, which was deserted in the twilight that was shadowing it. She sat on a swing and motioned for Harry to do the same.

“They’re my relatives.” Harry stared at her in disbelief. “My aunt and uncle. I went to live with them when I were three an’ I ran away when I were six.” He didn’t ask about her life before that; she was saddened enough already. “They – they hate my parents. Always have, always will. Those three years I stayed with them were horrible... They always looked at me, not hating me, but never liking me. It was as if they thought I was my parents or I was going to become them. Everyday they told me how horrible my parents were and what nasty things they would always do. I don’t remember them much, but I know they were good people. They only did what they believed was right. So I ran away from my aunt and uncle and that’s why I live on the streets.”

An overwhelming rush of sympathy filled Harry. He could not imagine how horrible it must have been for Nymph having to grow up with

people who hated her parents and treated her badly for it. There was only one thing he didn't understand. "But why go back, then?"

Nymph smiled softly, which was an expression Harry was not used to seeing on her. It unnerved him a little. "Because I knew they could get me these." From within he baggy jumper, she withdrew a vial that was filled with a potion of some kind. The same type that she had gotten for him before to change his appearance.

He shook his head and groaned. "Nymph, you didn' have to do that for me. I'm not worth it."

To his surprise, she laughed. "I'll be damned if you're not worth it, *Harry Potter*. Come on, we'd better head off. We gots to get to Kings Cross in the morning."

At ten o'clock, Nymph and Harry were sitting in the last compartment on the Hogwarts Express, Nymph's trunk stowed away and Harry in the guise of Jeremy once again. They had decided that, rather than arrive closer to the departure time, they would arrive early so that few would see them doing so. It meant that Harry would be saved from being bombarded by questions as to what had happened at the end of the year (not that Nymph knew what had happened either) and they would most likely be less disturbed as most couldn't be bothered to travel to the end of the train.

To keep them amused while time passed before they could watch people arrive to board the train, Harry and Nymph played a game of darts using their knives as the darts and a photograph from a magazine that Nymph had as the target. The game didn't work very well in the confined space, but this only served to add to their amusement. They had to end the game when people began to arrive on the platform, however, as occasionally the knives missed the target and flew out of the open window. Somehow, they did not think that it would be terribly inconspicuous if knives were seen to fly out of their compartment.

For some reason, as the platform got more crowded, Nymph found the sight of parents worrying over children and giving tearful farewells remarkably funny. Though he didn't find it *quite* as hysterical as her, Harry had to agree to some degree. Was it really necessary to have all that fuss? It wasn't as if they were *dying* or going somewhere horrible. At least they were going back home afterwards. All the same, he couldn't help but think of how it might have been *him* out there if Aunt Petunia and his parents hadn't been killed.

The sight of Malfoy amused them both, however. There was a faint line on his nose, a cut, from where Nymph had punched him. When one boy asked about it, Malfoy gave his worst glare and refused to answer.

The Weasleys were also rather humorous when they arrived on the platform, with only one minute to spare till the train's departure. They

were looking severely flustered and were buzzing about like a group of red haired flies. All of the Weasleys present, with the exception of the parents, had to run as the train started moving off slowly without them.

Within five minutes of leaving Kings Cross, the door to their compartment opened, much to Harry's annoyance. It was the Weasley twins.

"Hey, Harry," said one of them after sharing a glance with his counterpart. "Who's your –"

"- friend? Mind if we join you? Everywhere –"

"- else is full."

The disjointed way that they finished each other's sentences did nothing to suppress his annoyance. "*Do not call me that!*" In a flash, Harry was on his feet in front of them, a knife pressed against each of the twins' throats. The gulped visibly and they looked at the knives fearfully. He smirked at them. Good, they still remembered what he – or rather *Sir* – had done; he had been afraid they'd forget. "Who she is, is not your concern. And actually, we *do* mind if you join us. Leave."

To his delight, they did. Harry sat back down and put his knives away. Only then did Nymph speak.

"Bit protective of your compartment, aren't you? How comes they knows who you are?"

"There was an incident," he replied vaguely and refused to say anymore on the subject.

The rest of the train ride passed undisturbed. During the ride, Nymph informed Harry that she would not, under any circumstances, call him Jeremy as it "just didn't suit" him. It had taken him the better part of a half hour to persuade her not to call him Harry either. Finally she consented to calling him Jerry, a name which was relatively similar to Harry.

It was a clear, crispy night that they disembarked from the train into, dressed in their school robes (Harry had bought some to change into). Hagrid was easily spotted – and heard – calling the first years over so they could take the traditional trip across the lake to Hogwarts.

“See you at the feast then,” Harry said to Nymph in farewell. She frowned at him.

“Why? You goin’ somewhere?”

He blinked at her. Could it be, that for once, he knew something she didn’t? “First years go across the lake with Hagrid...”

“Really? How quaint.” Nymph did not go over to the tall looming form of Hagrid, however, but instead began to lead the way forwards that the rest of the students were taking. Harry hurried to follow.

“You’re not going with the first years, are you?” If it had been anyone else, Harry would have found it very surprising indeed that they were going to break school rules before even getting to the castle, but this was Nymph. She was crazy. Technically, he supposed, they weren’t at school yet therefore the rules were not in place. Somehow, he doubted the teachers would see it that way.

“Why should I have to go a different way just ‘cause I’m a first year? That’s discrimination, that is.” She was looking at him with that feral grin again. Harry refrained from shuddering.

Abruptly, Nymph stopped and Harry turned to see what she was staring at. In front of them were carriages and harnessed to the front of those carriages, were the strangest horses he had ever seen. They had wings for one thing. They looked slightly like skeletons of horses, only they still had flesh. The bones were jutting out of them and they had a dragonish face. No one else seemed to notice them.

“Er, Harry?”

“Yes, Nymph?” He was too distracted by the winged horses to notice the use of his name.

“I thinks the school’s too scaffy to get real horses...”

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“Who’re you?”

After entering Hogwarts and filing into the Great Hall, Harry and Nymph had sat themselves at the Gryffindor table, like Harry was used to. Nymph, however, looked a bit uncomfortable and was sneering distastefully at the nearby Gryffindors. It had been Ron that asked the question.

“Name’s Nymph.” Not quite the one for long conversations it appeared.

“I wouldn’t sit by *him* if I were you.” If Harry weren’t already dreading the upcoming confrontation between himself and Dumbledore, he would have punched Ron. Hard.

Nymph looked to be on the verge of saying “Well you’re *not* me” but she bit it down and smiled sweetly, which looked like it was taking considerable effort. “Why not?” Harry groaned. He could see where this was going.

“He gave Ron a concussion!”

“He broke Malfoy’s nose –“

“Stole someone’s broom –“

“*While they were on it* –“

“Savagely attacked a troll –“

“Set the forest on fire –“

“I did *not* set the forest on fire!” he protested at once. Why did no one believe him when he said that? Next to his other deeds, he supposed it might be a bit dodgy. The rambling continued as if he had not spoken.

“Stuck giant needles in the twins’ feet –“

“Set their hair on fire –“

“Bombarded them with stones –“

“Flung burning trees on top of them –“

“And attacked a teacher when they were trying to get the Philosopher’s Stone.”

Nymph turned to look at him, her face unreadable. She didn’t say anything for a moment then winked conspiringly. “That’s *all*? That’s *all* he did in a whole *year*? Wow, you lot really did get off easy, didn’t you? You should see the stuff he does normally.”

Nobody spoke. Nearly everyone was staring at him apprehensively, some fearfully.

“Er, sh-shouldn’t you be with the f-first years?” Neville asked nervously, in a gutsy attempt to change the subject. It was really quite brave considering it was *Neville*.

Nymph ignore his question and countered with one of her own. “What’s your name?”

“N-Neville Longbottom...” Her face split into her wide grin.

“Longbottom, you say? Our parents knew each other well!”

Before Harry – or anyone else for that matter – had a chance to enquire about this, McGonagall entered the hall carrying a four-legged stool with the Sorting Hat upon it and a trail of first years behind her. The hat immediately launched into a song thatn Harry paid little attention to; it was very similar to the previous year. As McGonagall began to call out names, Nymph turned to Harry, ignoring her completely.

“Not much? *Not much*? How the hell is that not much?”

“Oh, was that what you were asking about? You should have said...” he replied in a blatantly false innocent voice.

“Don’t look now, *Jerry*, but half the staff’s looking at you.”

“That would be because you kidnapped me in the summer.”

“I did not!”

“As far as they know, I was kidnapped. I bet you a galleon Dumbledore asks to speak with me after the feast.”

“The only money I have is some of yours... so you’re on.”

Something was wrong up at the head table. McGonagall had ceased her name calling but no one had stepped forwards. She called the name again, frowning.

“Woops,” Nymph said, grinning sheepishly as she stood up from the Gryffindor table. “That’s me.”

“Why weren’t you with the other first years?” McGonagall demanded sharply, glancing at Harry.

“The first years went a different way?” Nymph asked, wide-eyed.

McGonagall regarded her suspiciously but did nothing other than call out her name again, just before she tried on the hat.

“Lestrangle, Denebola.”

Harry had to smother a laugh. Her name was Denebola Lestrangle? No wonder she went by Nymph. The whole hall was staring at her, muttering. Students and teacher alike were probably wondering why she had not entered with the first years as well as why she had been talking to him, the evil Jeremy White. Neville had gone white. It was no more than thirty seconds before the hat called out its decision.

“SLYTHERIN!”

Nymph flung the hat off unceremoniously and practically skipped, not to the Slytherin table that was clapping uncertainly, but to the Gryffindor one and her seat beside Harry. The hesitant clapping ceased as everyone continued to stare at her. McGonagall frowned, but called out the next name regardless. Slowly, most people’s

attention wandered back to the sorting but many remained staring fixatedly at Nymph.

"You know, *Denebola*," Harry began, barely choking the words out around his snickering. He blinked and suddenly there was a knife pressed against his throat.

"You call me that *ever again* and I swear to God, *White*, that I'll do it."

Still grinning and not at all fazed by the threat, Harry consented. "So where'd Nymph come from then?"

She shrugged. "My middle name's Nymphadora and there weren't no way I was shortening Denebola." He was just about to ask her why she was still sitting at the Gryffindor table (amongst many glaring Gryffindors) and not the Slytherin table (with many frowning Slytherins) when Neville, looking quite fierce, spoke.

"You're a *Lestrangle*?"

This seemed to only make Nymph grin wider. "You *do* remember my parents!"

Obviously there was something that they both knew that he didn't. From the look of fury that was on Neville's face, Harry was willing to bet that their parents were *not* friends. In fact, hadn't Neville said to Ron last year that he lived with his grandmother? He would ask Nymph about it later; watching Neville's face turn strange colours was more amusing than pondering questions he could not possibly no the answer to. It rather looked like Neville might attack Nymph.

"Potter, Harry?" McGonagall read out of the list of names to be sorted, without thinking, and turned to look at the line of first years before realising what she had said. Her brow creased in confusion. Unfortunately, this captured the attention of everyone in the hall, Neville included. Perhaps Harry wouldn't get to see him attack Nymph, though it would have been amusing.

For his part, Harry was confused as well. His name had already been called out last year and even if it hadn't, he was too old to be a first

year now. McGonagall, along with what Harry suspected to be the entire teaching staff, knew who he was and that he had already been sorted. None of them would have added his name to the list. More than a few glances from the head table had been directed at him, along with those of Hermione and the twins. The only explanation Harry could think of was that the list was generated by magic but that didn't fulfil his curiosity's needs either. He had already been sorted.

The entire hall was filled with the mutterings of pupils as they speculated why his name had been called out again and yet no one went forward to the hat. Nymph seemed impervious to the confusion that had fallen and lent forward to whisper in his ear.

"Off you go then." Harry sent her a withering look in reply.

Surprisingly, it was neither McGonagall nor even Dumbledore that spoke to move the sorting on, quieting the murmurs of the students, but the Sorting Hat itself.

"I am bound to sort all who ought be sorted."

Needless to say, this only served to revive incessant chatter at a greater volume. Harry decided that he did *not* like the Sorting Hat. It only drew attention to him. Well, not directly to *him* but to who he should be. Absentmindedly he wondered how flammable it was while Dumbledore silenced the school and let the sorting continue.

Disappointingly, Neville did not say another word to Nymph. He just sat and glared at her with a hatred that was extremely out of place on the usually timid boy's face. His parents must have really hated hers.

Once the sorting was finally over, without further mishap, Dumbledore stood and made some announcements about rules or something; Harry didn't really pay much attention. The old man looked about to sit down when another thought seemed to occur to him.

"And would Miss Lestrangle please sit at the Slytherin table."

The girl in question did not fight this order. She stood, took hold of Harry's forearm and dragged him over to the Slytherin table with her,

where she took a seat opposite Malfoy and deposited Harry beside her. Dumbledore, having just sat down, stood up again.

"I would ask that Mister White now *return* to the Gryffindor table."

He made to get up to obey, feeling somewhat embarrassed by Nymph, but she stopped him. "Why?" she called out towards Dumbledore, ignoring the shocked whispers that sprung up. Apparently no one had questioned Dumbledore before.

"It is customary," he replied calmly, giving her one of his piercing stares that, unlike most, did not seem to faze her in the slightest. "For one to sit at one's house table."

"But why should he get to sit somewhere I don't? That's discrimination, that is." Harry tried to tug his arm free and leave for the Gryffindor table but she held on firmly. Why did she feel the need to cause *multiple* scenes before the year even started? Surely all the attention was unnecessary.

"Let us not keep the others from the feast any longer, Miss Lestrange. I shall speak to you and Mister White in my office after the feast."

Nymph smirked in triumph, though Harry couldn't really see why, as the golden plates before them suddenly filled with so much food that it couldn't possibly be eaten in one meal. Immediately conversation sprang up all over the hall and Harry could hear the name Lestrange being mentioned more than a few times.

"Why did *you* want to attack *me*? Don't you know who I am?" Malfoy was staring at Nymph in confusion and outrage. She snorted.

"Course I know who you are; you're Draco Malfoy."

This only perplexed Malfoy further, it seemed. "You are the daughter of Bellatrix and Rodolphus?" At her nod he continued. "Then you know we're cousins! So why did you feel the need to greet me with an assault?"

Nymph might have known they were cousins, but Harry certainly didn't. Nymph and Malfoy, related? It was unthinkable. Nymph had

long dark hair and Malfoy had the blondest hair Harry had ever seen. It wasn't only their looks that differed, either. Malfoy was aristocratic and snobbish while Nymph... Nymph wasn't. The question did appear to genuinely confuse her though.

"That is your real hair colour, isn't it?"

Malfoy looked at her as if she were crazy, which Harry considered her to be, and turned to his meal. When he heard Harry chuckle at her antics, however, his attention swiftly changed to him. "I never pegged you as one that would be friends with a Lestranger, White." He hesitated, then added, "I never really pegged you as one for having friends, either."

Nymph, like Harry, only had a small amount of food on her plate. She gave the impression that Malfoy amused her greatly. "Oh, that's 'cause he's right anti-social. Isn't that right, Jerry? Keeps driving them all off. Keeps killing them off to don't you – och, I'm sorry H- Jerry. I didn't mean it like that."

She had seen the forlorn look on his face. When she had mentioned killing off friends, Harry couldn't help but think of Mir. Even though it had been over a year since he had learnt of his death, Harry couldn't help but feel guilty and pained about it. He nodded his acceptance of her apology and turned to his food.

Malfoy, though looking inquisitive, changed the subject, for which Harry was glad. "Dene –" he began to say Nymph's name but almost as soon as he opened his mouth, she cut him off, glowering.

"The name's *Nymph*."

He frowned but nodded. "Well then, Nymph, why haven't we met before? Mother and Father almost never mention you."

She considered the blonde haired boy in front of her, as if trying to decide what to tell him, for a few moments before answering. Surprisingly the answer she gave was the truth. Evidently Nymph felt that she did not need to be quite as tight-lipped as she was on the streets. "When I was three, I was sent to live with Andromeda. I ran away when I was six."

Harry could not help but feel slightly annoyed that she had refused to tell him yet here she was, telling Malfoy after only minutes of meeting him. They *were* cousins, Harry supposed, and Malfoy probably knew more about the affairs within their family than Harry, but all the same, it made him slightly resentful. Andromeda, he took as Nymph's aunt and he did not fail to notice the lack of title she bestowed upon her.

The feast was over all too quickly for Harry's liking. It had passed since then with small talk of no consequence between Malfoy and them. After being dismissed, they bade farewell to him in the entrance hall - or rather, Nymph bade him farewell; Harry simply nodded his head towards him.

"I'll see you around," Malfoy said airily and then bent close to Harry to whisper in his ear. "*Potter.*"

Harry's feet carried him and Nymph on the route to Dumbledore's office mechanically. His mind was numb. How could Malfoy possibly know who he was? Unless he had just said that on a hunch and had been trying to trick him into admitting it. No, that didn't seem too likely. Malfoy was not one to go about taking chances. Perhaps he had recognised him at Diagon Alley when he was not under disguise and then put two and two together. He vaguely remembered running a hand through his hair. Of course! How could he have been so stupid? Malfoy would have seen the scar on his forehead as clear as day. Normally, through the use of the potion Nymph had given him, it was invisible but Malfoy would have recognised it immediately.

Harry ran his hand through his cursed hair that had *still* retained the green highlights and black colour. For some reason, as he and Nymph arrived outside the stone gargoyle, he found himself wondering if there was a way to get rid of it but then thought against it. Despite all the problems it had caused him, he rather liked it.

The gargoyle, as if recognising Harry, jumped aside for the two of them without waiting for the password they did not know, revealing the moving staircase behind it. They climbed it and when they reached the top, Nymph simply opened the large wooden door without bothering to knock, admitting them into the office that Dumbledore and Snape were currently residing in.

"Take a seat," Dumbledore instructed, not even batting an eyelid at the intrusion. He motioned towards the two seats in front of the desk he was sitting behind. Snape was standing. "First of all, Miss Lestrange, your behaviour at tonight's feast was unacceptable."

Nymph opened her mouth to protest but Harry silenced her with a warning look. Now was not the time to be getting into fights with Dumbledore.

Dumbledore either did not notice or overlooked it. "But as it is the first night and you are new to this school, I will let you off with a warning. I will not tolerate disrespect towards the school rules or members of staff. Any further incidents of misconduct and you will be punished, am I clear, Miss Lestrange?"

The girl in question smiled earnestly. "Window clear." The adults in the room looked at her in confusion.

"She means crystal clear," Harry sighed. He wondered if she would ever learn the correct expressions she kept trying to use.

"Very well," said Dumbledore. "I was wondering, how it is that the two of you know each other?"

Harry glared at his nose. What business was it of his? It was all too possible that Dumbledore wanted to manipulate Nymph somehow, if only to get at Harry. He was doubtful that he would succeed; she was something of a wild spirit and was not easily made to follow rules. Still, Dumbledore's interest in her made him worry.

"We met on the train," Nymph said sweetly. Harry turned to her in surprise. Lying was like a second nature to her. It was rather amazing how quickly she could come up with such plausible excuses. "Me and Harry hit it right off, didn't we?" He refrained from groaning. Well, it *would* have been a good excuse had she not mentioned him by his real name.

"Very well," Dumbledore said again. "Professor Snape will escort you to the Slytherin dormitories, Miss Lestrange. There is something that I wish to discuss with Mister White. Welcome to Hogwarts."

Nymph left with Snape after giving Harry a sympathetic glance, leaving him alone with Dumbledore.

"Where were you this summer, Harry? Your disappearance caused quite a stir." Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw that Dumbledore was trying to make eye contact with him. He remained focused on his nose.

I'll bet it caused a stir, he thought bitterly. *You were probably going spare looking for your key to defeating the Dark Lord.* Suddenly, Harry found himself raising his eyes to bore into Dumbledore's unwillingly. He also opened his mouth to speak. But wait, he hadn't instructed his mouth to open, had he? Trying to close it proved that he no longer had control over his eyes and mouth.

"I don't remember."

Though Sir had not spoken to Harry since he had left Hogwarts, Harry knew it was him that was in control of his body. If he could have, his eyes would have widened in surprise.

Dumbledore frowned and nodded, accepting this answer, no doubtfulness in his eyes. "Where did you really meet Miss Lestrange?"

"I don't remember," Sir answered again through Harry.

Again, Dumbledore seemed to believe him. "I should be wary around her, if I were you, Harry. She comes from a dubious family."

Before he was filled with anger, Harry wondered whether Dumbledore was referring to the Malfoys, her parents or her aunt and uncle. How dare Dumbledore tell him how he should or should not act? It was his choice who he became friends with and who he spent his time with. It wasn't any of *his* business.

"It's *my* decision who I associate myself with, Dumbledore," Sir answered for him, still looking Dumbledore in the eye. "You have no control over what I do." Though Sir had probably not intended it so, to Harry it seemed like a way of reminding him that even though Dumbledore had no control over him, *Sir* did.

Dumbledore frowned. "You may return to Gryffindor Tower. Welcome back to Hogwarts."

Once outside the office, Harry found himself in control of his body again. He almost jumped in surprise when he heard Sir speak without using his mouth and voice.

"Welcome back to Hogwarts."

The next morning when Harry ventured into the Great Hall for breakfast, he was surprised to see that for the first time since he had come to Hogwarts, he wasn't the first. Then he remembered that Nymph had also come to Hogwarts and was as unused to long sleeps as he was. To know that he wasn't the only one who rose so early in the morning made him feel less strange. Slightly. Strangely enough, Nymph wasn't sitting at the Slytherin table – again. She was seated at the Gryffindor table picking at a piece of toast when Harry joined her.

"You know, Nymph," he said, taking a seat next to her. "That when the Sorting Hat called out "Slytherin" it means you're *not* sorted into Gryffindor?"

She gave him one of her cheekiest grins. "They can't stop you sitting somewhere. Really they can't stop you doing nothing. I shouldn't be prevented from sitting with you just 'cause we're in different houses. That'd be discrimination and encourage house rivalry."

Discrimination? House rivalry? Where had the Nymph he knew gone? The girl he knew, while not caring much for rules, certainly wasn't as thoughtful as *that*. Overnight it seemed she had grown a new, deeper, meaningful, personality. It was just so... out of character. Nymph was supposed to be, not exactly light-hearted but unperturbed by things going on around her. Something wasn't right. She was planning something.

He was brought out of his musings, however, when a hand gave him an almighty *thump* on the back of the head. "Don't you give me that look," Nymph warned against his glare. "That were for not telling me how uncomfortable the beds was! I swears, that thing tried to *eat* me!"

The pair remained in the Great Hall long after they had finished their toast (or, in Nymph's case, placed it on the seat of one of the teachers which happened to be Snape; his hooked nose sneered and made the toast disappear with a flick of his wand). Sir had been *generous* enough to give Harry the morning off as it was the first day but afterwards, he did not know how he would explain to Nymph that

he chose to disappear each morning. When the hall slowly began to fill up with students, most, Slytherins not included, glared at the pair of them and the Gryffindors went as far as to make snide comments and strongly suggest that Nymph sit at her own table. Harry understood why the school didn't like him, but what did they have against Nymph? He doubted she would tell him; if it were up to her he would still not know anything about her relatives. He would just have to find out for himself.

Before long, McGonagall came round handing out timetables. She skimmed over Nymph then did a double take as she realised that once again Nymph had chosen to sit at the Gryffindor table rather than her own house. Fishing out her timetable from the middle of the stack, McGonagall handed it to her and without even glancing at it, Nymph pocketed it.

"You are aware, Miss Lestrage," McGonagall said tersely. "That this is the *Gryffindor* table and as such, you have no place at it?"

"Yup," Nymph replied cheerfully, not batting an eyelash at the frown of disapproval that had quickly spread over McGonagall's face.

"As it is the first day, I shall not take points but should this occur in the future, I will not be so lenient. *Am I clear?*"

Nymph sent Harry a sly smile. "Glass." Harry refrained from hitting himself on the head as, once again, Nymph failed to use a common expression correctly. McGonagall moved on after giving him his timetable as well, muttering to herself.

"So, Jerry," Nymph said, as soon as McGonagall was properly out of earshot. "What do we got today?"

Harry had consulted his timetable and was about to reply that they had Herbology first when he realised what Nymph had said. "What we have today? Nymph, I dunno if you've noticed but *you* are a Slytherin first year and *I* am a Gryffindor second year. Strangely enough, we don't have the same timetable."

“Ha – I mean, Jerry, Jerry, Jerry,” Nymph said, her smile faux sweet and her tone condescending. “You gots so much to learn. You see, Hogwarts just wouldn’t be as fun if we aren’t in class together.”

“You’re gonna get chucked out the school before the first week’s through, you know that?” It did not set his mind at ease when the girl before him simply smiled in a would-be innocent way. Harry sighed. There was nothing *he* could do to stop her from doing what she wanted. Maybe if she got expelled from Hogwarts she would stay away from Dumbledore where she would be safe...

And so, it was an apprehensive Harry and a very smug Nymph that made their way to the greenhouses for double Herbology with the Hufflepuffs. The rest of the class was already waiting outside the greenhouse for Professor Sprout by the time they got there and needless to say, none were too pleased by Nymph’s presence let alone the sight of Harry.

“What are *you* doing here?” Ron was quick to ask rather loudly and rather rudely. “Trying to pretend you’re smarter than you are? All you Slytherin scum are the same.”

Bizarrely Ron’s reaction was rather mild compared to Neville’s, the timid, blundering boy. As soon as the boy laid his eyes upon her, Neville lunged towards her, wand forgotten, and started to punch her as hard as he could. Well, he attempted to. Nymph, being of slight build, was pushed backwards by the power of his lunge and tripped over a pot, hitting her head off the ground. Neville fared considerably worse, however. In other circumstances, Nymph would have probably been able to withstand the force of his attack but as she saw the boy start towards her, she tripped him and landed a punch of her own, so violently that Neville was sent sprawling away in the other direction, clutching his nose which had begun to bleed profusely. It was to this scene that Sprout made her entrance.

“What is going on here? Longbottom, Lestrangle! Brawling on the first day? Twenty points from both your houses! Appalling behaviour; I did not expect this of you, Mister Longbottom! Both of you, go to the Hospital Wing and be thankful I did no more than take points!”

Before Harry could even begin to wonder at why Neville had attacked Nymph in the first place, Sprout ushered the rest of the class into greenhouse three which housed far more interesting and dangerous plants than those they had previously worked on in greenhouse one. Neither Neville nor Nymph returned and would not be seen until Defence.

The lesson turned out to be about Mandrakes, peculiar plants that looked like ugly babies. They were re-potting them which proved more difficult than it first appeared. Harry found himself working with a group of Hufflepuffs who, before they were required to wear earmuffs that blocked all noise, talked quietly amongst themselves whilst shooting him apprehensive looks. Even after the earmuffs were firmly in place over their ears they did not stop glancing at him every few seconds, as if fearing that if they did he would re-pot *them* instead.

Transfiguration, which was after Herbology, proved at least a little bit less tedious. With all the practise Harry had the previous year at transfiguring (both verbally and non-verbally and with a wand and without a wand), he found the lesson well within his skill level and managed to transfigure his beetle into a button within the first five minutes of attempting to do so. Discretely, he then attempted to do it without a wand and then non-verbally with and without his wand. By the end of the lesson the only thing he had not successfully managed to do was transfigure the beetle without his wand and without any spoken commands. To Harry it seemed wandless magic was a lot harder than with a wand but at least he found it significantly easier the more he practised.

Lunch was a pleasantly quiet affair for him with Nymph still not making her reappearance. Despite the whispers and mutters he could blatantly hear going round the hall about both he and her, Harry enjoyed being undisturbed and relished it; for some reason he did not think that he would have the opportunity to do so very often in the future. Life certainly was more interesting with Nymph around.

Whilst Harry and the rest of the class were seated in the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom waiting for Lockhart – he had heard Dean telling Seamus that this was the name of the new teacher –

Nymph slipped into the room, unnoticed, and took a seat beside Harry. Her head, where it had been bleeding profusely before, was now whole, he was glad to see. They said nothing, though Nymph grinned mischievously.

At last, Lockhart appeared with perfectly placed golden hair and immaculate turquoise robes which he seemed to have colour coordinated with his eyes. What an odd man... He picked up Hermione's copy of *Travels with Trolls* and held it up to show a picture of himself winking on the cover.

"Me," he said, pointing at it and winking as well. "Gilderoy Lockhart, Order of Merlin, Third Class, Honourary Member of the Dark Force Defence League and five times winner of *Witch Weekly's* Most-Charming-Smile Award – but I don't talk about that."

Beside him, Harry heard Nymph mutter sardonically, "Didn't he just talk 'bout it?"

"I see you've all bought a complete set of my books – well done."

This time he joined Nymph in snorting in amusement. Bought? Who'd said anything about *buying* his books? His own copy that sat in front of him, towered precariously on the edge of his desk, was previously under the ownership of a Ravenclaw fifth year who had generously decided to *donate* him it.

Lockhart proceeded to hand out quizzes with fifty-four ridiculous questions on himself. He didn't even bother to glance at the pupils as he handed them out and so, missed the fact that Nymph was wearing Slytherin colours on her black robe and was a first year. How idiotic could the man be? Harry had thought that comment even before he noticed that the questions were all about trivial things such as Lockhart's favourite colour. Smirking, he joined Nymph in her endeavour to fill it in with equally ridiculous answers.

Half an hour later Lockhart collected the papers in and began rifling through them, commenting on what irrelevant facts people did not know about him. He made no comment on Nymph or Harry's.

The rest of the lesson was equally amusing. Lockhart gave them a ten minute lecture on the dangerous and fearsome creatures that were lurking in a veiled cage on his desk. When he uncovered it, pixies were revealed to be within and the amusement was not restricted to the two of them sitting at the back, Nymph still unnoticed. When Lockhart opened the cage, pandemonium broke out.

The pixies shot in every direction like rockets. Two of them seized Neville by the ears and lifted him into the air. Several shot straight through the window, showering the back row with broken glass. The rest proceeded to wreck the classroom more effectively than a rampaging rhino. They grabbed ink bottles and sprayed the class with them, shredded books and papers, tore pictures from the walls, upended the waste bin, grabbed bags and books and threw them out of the smashed window; within minutes, half the class was sheltering under desks and Neville was swinging from the candelabra in the ceiling.

Amidst the chaos, Nymph found it to be far more humorous to *help* the pixies rather than hinder them and proceeded to participate in throwing objects at various occupants in the room (mainly Lockhart) and upturning desks and chairs. All in all, it was a very educational lesson.

As the bell rang, there was a mad scramble for the door. Just as Harry and Nymph were about to leave, Lockhart emerged from under his own desk (which he had dived under in a moment of true *bravery*) and ordered them to return the pixies to their cages. Just before he scuttled out the room, he paused, glancing at Nymph.

"I didn't realise I had a Slytherin in this class..." he said and then proceeded to hurry away without waiting for an answer. Rather than follow his commands, the pair thought it would be interesting to see the effects of simply leaving the pixies free to roam to castle and left too.

The next day, rather than go to the Great Hall directly, Harry ventured into the Room for the first time since he had escaped from Hogwarts – again – with Nymph. It was just as he had left it, empty and barren. That was how Sir liked it, however. The way it was there were no distractions that might tempt Harry's mind to wander from his lessons. Although this time he did not need an object to divert his attention. Harry already had something that was preoccupying him.

"What's with the possession thing again?" he demanded of Sir, as soon as the door was firmly closed and locked behind him. It would not do to have some suspicious student to come wandering in on him – like Nymph.

Zap! What felt like a bolt of electricity ran through Harry's entire person. *"I'll thank you not to take that tone with me. Have you forgotten already what is expected of you as long as I teach you?"* reprimanded Sir instantly. It seemed like everything was exactly as he had left it when he had chosen to go with Nymph.

"Sorry," sighed Harry. It was going to take considerable effort to become accustomed to Sir's... interesting... behaviour orders again.

"Very well," said Sir curtly. *"Why do you ask about my interference in Dumbledore's office? You and I both know that you could not have done a better job at lying. As such, you should be thanking me that I protected your precious Nymph. Should you have answered, I am sure that you would have incriminated her somehow. Now we have Dumbledore wondering about entirely the wrong thing. It will keep him distracted sufficiently should the need arise."*

Harry pondered this. What Sir had said made perfect sense but somewhere within him, he was sure that Sir was up to something. There was something that he wasn't telling him, some hidden agenda. Or was Harry simply being paranoid? It was possible that all the conspiring events in his life had led him to become overly suspicious. Maybe Nymph was right. Maybe he did need to "lighten up".

“*Enough*,” commanded Sir sternly. Was there any other way that Sir could command? “*Let us begin*.”

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When at last Harry ventured into the Great Hall, which ended up being with the majority of Hogwarts’ students, Nymph was already seated – for once at her rightful table without Harry. He felt pleased that she had for once chosen to abide by the rules of Hogwarts and was not in a particularly attention-seeking mood. At the same time, however, he could not help but feel saddened that he had, once again, to eat his breakfast on his own at the far end of the table bearing the brunt of nearly the entire room’s glares. He did not mind the glares, as such, but with Nymph, it had been highly entertaining hearing her comments on the various occupants of the glares. She seemed to think that each glare had to have a hidden story behind it and a personal reason. But, alas, Harry was to eat his breakfast in solitude.

Why wasn’t Nymph eating breakfast with him? The thought worried Harry almost as much as the thought of her eating breakfast with him did. There had to be a reason that she had decided that today, as opposed to yesterday, she would eat at the Slytherin table. Perhaps she had something she wished to discuss with one of her fellow Slytherins like Malfoy. They had seemed to be getting along well enough, which wasn’t all that surprising considering they were supposedly related. Harry didn’t really think that was the case, however. She was not talking with anyone despite nearly all the Slytherins being present at the table. Maybe she had accepted that at Hogwarts there were rules to abide by and that if she continued to disobey them long enough, there was a chance that she would simply be thrown out of Hogwarts. No, that didn’t seem too likely either. What *did* seem likely, on the other hand, was the possibility that she had done something to warrant an innocent looking appearance. Or was planning to do something.

Harry pushed these thoughts to the back of his mind as he rose to attend his first class of the morning, potions. It was better not to dwell on things for which there was no definite answer. Besides, he would need his wits about him if he was to survive having potions *first thing*.

Snape wasn't really a morning person. Then again, Snape wasn't really an afternoon person either. Snape really wasn't even a day person at all. Harry wondered briefly, as he walked towards the dungeons, if Snape was, in fact, nocturnal and was much more amiable during the night. Somehow he doubted it.

When Harry was only one dark, cold, damp corridor away from the potions classroom, he felt himself grabbed from behind, which rather surprised him. He had heard no one approach him, something that he was normally quite good at especially in echoing corridors. In a flash – well not quite a flash – Harry had spun around, released himself from the hands which had taken him so impolitely and had a knife out threateningly. He had fully expected the culprit to be Malfoy again; the blonde did have a habit of choosing the most inappropriate times and ways to speak with him. To his surprise, it was Nymph.

"What the hell did you do that for?" he demanded of her. "If I was just a little bit more paranoid I'd have knifed you!"

"Oh hush," she replied candidly. "I know you wouldn't be doing that to me – I'm too nice. Anyway, I wanted to know what you thought you was doing leaving without me. Did you really think you could ditch me that easily?"

Ditch her? She hadn't been with him for him to ditch. What was she on about this time? "Eh?"

"Don't play dumb. I think I've figured it out, see, and I think the reason you tried to ditch me was 'cause you didn't want to sit next to me in potions. I understand if you don't, it's just it'd be nice for a little heads up, yeah?"

What? "Nymph, we don't have potions together. How could I sit next to you if we aren't in the same class? I don't know how you normally do potions, but the way Snape has us do them, it's a little hard."

Nymph frowned at him reprovingly, which only looked a little odd on her cheeky face. "Did you forget or something? I'm smarter than you, right? So I'm joining your classes, remember?"

Somehow, what with his lessons with Sir, Harry did not really think that Nymph was quite on par with him when it came to classes. He chose not to enlighten her on the fact; it would only annoy her. Besides that, Sir would probably make him spend a day in a hole or something as punishment for telling her about his lessons.

“You know, Nymph,” he said airily. “I’m not sure that Snape’s going to be quite as acceptant of your presence in his second year class as Lockhart was.”

“I think he’ll be more concerned with the fact that you’re late to be honest.”

Harry glanced at his watch and cursed as he saw that it was already time for the bell to ring. Yes, there it was and he was still not in his potions classroom. Without paying any more attention to Nymph, he darted out the alcove she had dragged him into. He didn’t even stop to inform her that he didn’t think it a very good idea that she was following him there.

Stopping his running just short of the door, Harry walked calmly into the potions classroom, determined not to appear fazed by his lateness. The rest of the class were not so unaffected. The moment the door opened, they gasped simultaneously. That would have happened if any pupil had been late for potions, especially if Snape had already begun talking, as it appeared he had. The fact that it was Harry, closely followed by Nymph appeared to heighten their shock and eagerness to see the repercussions. Murmurs broke out all over the room.

On the other hand, Snape did not look scandalised. He looked gleeful.

“Well, well, well! Decided to grace us with your presence, Mister *White*? So very good of you. And what’s this? You thought it appropriate to bring a *friend* to our potions lesson? My, my, my, how privileged we are.”

“I thought so too,” replied Harry airily. “Then again, I was considering not coming at all because I had to look at your ugly mug for a whole period. Not to worry though, I thought it would be better listening to you ramble on than do something productive, Snivellus.”

Harry mentally whacked himself over the head. What had he done that for? Upon entering the room, he hadn't had any intention of antagonising Snape but it had just kind of *slipped out*. There was something about Snape that was just so insult-able. Surely he couldn't be blamed for the words that were invoked whenever he looked at the man? Harry wasn't sure Snape would see it *quite* that way. Surely enough, he didn't.

"Twenty points from Gryffindor!" barked Snape, instantly. It almost seemed like a reflex. "I will have none of your insolence in my class this year, Po - White! Like father like son! Your father was an arrogant fool just as you are. He was always stretching the patients of others with no consideration towards them just as you are. The headmaster may see reason to allow your *two-faced* ways but make no mistake, if it were up to me, you would have been expelled the day you arrived! Twenty points more for the look on your face! And another twenty points for being late! And a detention for you, Miss Lestrangle!"

Sixty points in one little tirade from Snape seemed a little excessive. Certainly, other members of Gryffindor seemed to think so and it seemed to have invoked little bursts of outrage from them. Those, accompanied with the interesting shade of red Snape's normally pale face had turned, proved for quite an amusement start for the lesson. Harry wondered if he was actually going to have a potions lesson that morning. He wouldn't particularly mind not having one, of course, but he was rather frightened of being murdered whilst he slept by a pack of raging Gryffindors for losing too many points.

"How come you only gave her a detention but you took sixty points from me?" asked Harry, feeling slightly unjustly done by.

"Ten points for talking back to a teacher!" Snape did seem to be finding him a good outlet for his anger. "Miss Lestrangle, unlike you, was not late for this class. She was merely led by you to the wrong room. I cannot blame a first year on their second day for getting lost, can I? She is simply late for whatever class she should be attending and I'm sure Miss Lestrangle's teacher will deal with her accordingly."

"But sir," began Nymph, in a small, innocent voice. Harry turned to her in surprise. She sounded slightly upset by the turn of events –

and looked it too. Sometimes he hated her acting abilities. "Why do I have to serve detention when *he* doesn't?"

Snape considered her for a moment. "Five points to Slytherin for pointing out my mistake, Miss Lestrange. Very well, White, detention!"

Harry turned back to Snape in outrage. He couldn't really bring himself to be angry at Nymph though. She was just being Nymph. Although, it was slightly irksome that she had decided that she wasn't the only one whose spare time should be taken up with menial tasks. He sighed.

"I didn't really expect you to be fair. After all, why not punish the lowly second year for your unhappiness when you were at school. Really, I can't be blamed for your lack of friends. It's just, your nose scares people sometimes. Your hair doesn't help much either. There's no telling what's living in it."

Snape's face was rapidly turning from red to white to an interesting shade of puce. Strangely enough, Harry felt quite content. He had missed Snape. Truly he had. After all, Snape was his favourite teacher.

"A week's worth of detentions! Thirty points from Gryffindor! *Some* of us boy, wouldn't be so free with our tongues lest others do the same. You never know when someone would let it *slip* something about you. It might *scar you for life!*" Snape looked like he was taking a deep breath to compose himself. Whilst he did so, Harry wondered how many points he had lost already for Gryffindor in that one lesson. One hundred, was it? "Take your seat, White. Miss Lestrange, what class are you supposed to be in? I shall have someone *trustworthy* escort you there."

Nymph beamed at him pleasantly. Snape frowned at this unusual behaviour but brushed it off. Even he could see that there was no way to see into the bizarre way of thinking that she employed.

"I'm supposed to be here, sir."

Snape's, well, not exactly pleasant expression melted off his face into a sour one. "What exactly do you mean by that, Miss Lestrange?"

Surely White's presence has not addled your brain sufficiently to make it unclear that it is only *second* years in this class?" He turned to glare at Harry, who had indeed taken his seat at an empty desk on his own, as if it were his entire fault. Harry smile cheerfully back. There was no way that Snape could blame Nymph's situation on him.

"Oh no, sir," she said with feigned wide-eyed innocence. Harry was not altogether sure that Snape couldn't see right through her act. "Jerry there didn't make me do nothing. I decided that since I was smarter than him I should be allowed into all his classes. After all, they haven't moved him down yet."

"Whilst I am sure that you are, indeed, more intelligent than White, it is neither for you nor I to decide if you should join this class. I would not be too proud of your achievement if I were you. A toad has enough brain cells to have more intelligence than White. It is a matter you will have to bring up with the headmaster. Now, return to your own class. I will not have you disrupting my class any further."

He felt slightly annoyed at the slight on his intellect but said nothing as Nymph nodded solemnly at the professor, walked over to the seat beside Harry and took a seat. Before, he had noticed that Snape had been a lot less angry with Nymph than he had been with Harry, despite Harry doing a significantly lesser offence. Now, however, he was not sure that Snape was capable of refraining from removing his own house points.

"Miss Lestrangle," Snape hissed. "Did I not instruct you to return to your own classroom?"

Nymph glanced at Harry in confusion. "Yeah, but I just told you. This is my class now."

It was odd, but it looked rather like Snape was twitching. Yes, he had just done it again. Now *that* was a new reaction. Evidently he was struggling to choose from lunging at Nymph and deducting house points. Harry was inclined to believe that the professor would choose the former. Lockhart may not have been intelligent enough to notice anything amiss but Snape was clearly not so foolhardy. He thought it best he intervene for the sake of Nymph's wellbeing.

“Shouldn’t you be pleased that at least one person is willing to endure you? Really, I think she should be given an award for bravery or something.”

“White,” snarled Snape. The way things were looking, Snape might actually physically explode. Now wouldn’t *that* be a sight for sore eyes! “And Lestrangle. Headmaster’s office. *Now*. You lot,” he gestured at the remainder of the class, all watching the scene with wide eyes. “Copy chapters one and two and summarise. Anything not done is homework.”

The class frantically searched in bags for quills and parchment as Snape advanced on Harry and Nymph, took hold of the back of their collars and thrust them at the door. He seemed to be beyond comprehensible sentences. The professor kept growling and making odd snarling noises.

The walk to Dumbledore’s office was anything but amiable. Nymph was cheerful enough but Harry did not dare say anything to her lest Snape take the opportunity and, with no witnesses, curse him into oblivion. It didn’t help that Harry was dreading visiting Dumbledore’s office for the second time already. It was only the second day! Things were really getting a bit out of hand if he had to visit Dumbledore *every single day*.

At long last, the trio arrived at the stone gargoyle that guarded the entrance so effectively. It jumped aside at the sight of Snape. Harry wasn’t sure whether the man had uttered the password or the gargoyle was genuinely afraid of him. He wasn’t sure he wanted to know the answer.

When Snape knocked – or rather thumped – on the wooden door at the top of the moving staircase, they were greeted by a cheerful, “Come in!”

Dumbledore, for his part, looked surprised to see them entering his office so early in the morning. “Well, I say! I suppose you have a reason for bringing Miss Lestrangle and Mister White here other than a social visit? It is rather soon after your last.”

Snarling still, Snape thrust the two of them into chairs in front of Dumbledore's desk. He then proceeded to give a very long winded rant as to why they were there and exactly what their offences had been. Unable to escape Harry's notice was the fact that Snape neglected to mention in punishments that he had already administered. He was probably hoping that Dumbledore assumed he had not already taken the liberty and would do so himself.

"Miss Lestrage," began Dumbledore, staring at her intently over the tops of his half-moon spectacles. From what little knowledge of Dumbledore's mannerisms that he had, Harry thought that the old man was highly distrustful of Nymph. He wondered vaguely why for a brief moment before focussing his attention back on the conversation at hand.

"Whilst I do not doubt your ability in the areas which we teach, it would not be proper for me to allow you to move up a year. Aside from the fact that it would anger some of our already over-achieving students here at Hogwarts, you are too young to be a member of second year. It would simply not be fair to our other pupils."

"I'm only two weeks younger than Harry is!" protested Nymph before either Snape or Harry had a chance to even think about speaking. "And I'm smarter than him besides!"

"Whether or not that is the case," Dumbledore said sternly. The tone suited him much more than it did Nymph. "Is irrelevant. Mister White—" Harry did not notice the lack of "Harry" in that sentence but filed away the information for further investigation. "- was born just before the cut off date in the Hogwarts school year. If he had been born a day later, he would be joining you in first year. That is not the case, however, and I am not willing to make an exception on your behalf. We have many gifted witches and wizards in this school and it would not be fair to treat one as I am not prepared to treat others. I apologise but that is simply the way it shall have to be. You will simply have to make do as a first year."

"And what of their punishment?" demanded Snape. "Surely they ought to be punished for disrupting my lesson?"

“Indeed,” agreed Dumbledore. “I shall negate any punishments that have so far been placed upon the two of you today; we would not want you to end up with two sets of punishments, would we? I will then deduct twenty house points apiece and give you both a detention. Really, we are not off to a good beginning are we?”

Harry said nothing and out of the corner of his eye, he saw that Nymph was glaring at her boots. She looked thoroughly put out by her lack of success. Indeed, since Harry had known her, she had not failed to get anything she wanted. It must have been a foreign concept to her to hear Dumbledore refuse her request so brusquely. Snape looked to be quietly fuming.

“Before I send you off to your next classes,” asked Dumbledore after giving them a brief moment to not answer his question. “Is there anything you wish to tell me Mister White? Anything you’ve remembered since we last spoke?”

The old man was rather anxious to know how they had met, thought Harry. It was too bad that he had no intentions of telling him. Dumbledore would simply have to continue to worry.

“No.”

“Very well, then. I shall speak to you all some other time. For now, I believe second period is just beginning. I would advise you all to attend to your various classes. Good day.”

Without a further word each of the three left the office and went their separate ways at the stone gargoyles. Harry couldn’t help but think, as he made his way to his history of magic class, that he was slightly overdoing the visiting of Dumbledore’s office.

Slamming the door behind him, Harry collapsed against the wall, breathing heavily. He had just run nearly the entire length of the school in the hopes of evading the current predicament. It was nearly a week since he had last been called into Dumbledore's office. Somehow he had managed to escape being sent there again by Snape after he stirred his potion one too many times, for which he was thankful. Nymph had, begrudgingly and sullenly, joined the first year classes and had not attempted to invade his again.

That was not to say that she had settled down to following the rules, however. Far from it, in fact. As her resentment of the situation (and Harry suspected Dumbledore as well), she only grew more boisterous. Every meal that he attended, she would make a great show of leaving wherever she was currently seated to join him at the Gryffindor table. Each time she did this, she received a dockage of points. Harry thought that the teachers were attempting to employ the same technique that they had tried on him; they probably thought that eventually, when Nymph had lost enough points, the rest of Slytherin house would be so aggravated that they would prevent her leaving. Harry did not think it would be long before his friend started competing with him to see who could lose the most points. Between her mealtime activities and his potions lessons, it would be a difficult competition for her to win. The teachers had another thing coming if they thought that anything so small would stop Nymph.

Harry's current occupation (and that of the rest of the school) was far less enjoyable, however. After his and Nymph's release of the pixies upon the school, the Weasley twins had been inspired. It had not taken the teacher's long to round up the pixies they had released from Lockhart's classroom and minimum damage had been inflicted upon the school. To the Weasley twins, pixies were mere trifles and were incapable of getting them into serious trouble. They saw the little sprites as an excellent way to cause disruption and creating havoc. They were right.

It had taken them a few days to acquire sufficient pixies for their task, but eventually, after many days, they had succeeded. The twins had

taken great pleasure in releasing thousands, possibly over a million, pixies upon the school. Within an hour, the whole castle was filled with them and barely a single room was left untouched. Consequently, classes were cancelled for the day as the teachers and any students capable of dealing with pixies were enlisted in the effort to rid Hogwarts of them.

They weren't doing a very good job, thought Harry from his momentary haven inside a broom cupboard. The decision to exempt them from classes hadn't been too wise either. The castle was ridden with the pixies and there was nowhere to go that wasn't in danger of being infested. The students that were not involved in the mass clearing, only served to spur the pixies on. The moment they were sighted, the pixies would chase the poor student until they had been caught and otherwise dealt with.

That was the reason for Harry's current hiding in the broom cupboard. He had managed so far to escape notice, employing his sneaking techniques from stealing on the streets. It had been inevitable, however, that he be caught by the devious beasties and as he had snuck round a corner, carefully avoiding a group that were in the corridor behind him, he had run into a cloud of them. Simultaneously, they had made a grab for his black, still green highlighted hair, and ears. Harry had wasted no time in batting them away with one of Lockhart's books, feeling no shame in this menial purpose for them.

Cautiously, Harry peered through the keyhole of the door. It wouldn't be long before some pixies made their way inside the cupboard and then he would be unwisely trapped. At the lack of movement from outside, he slowly opened the door so that he could glance warily up and down the corridor.

Sir was having great fun with the events, almost as much as the Weasley twins who, if Harry met them in a dark corridor somewhere, he was willing to curse into oblivion. Every time Harry had passed another group of pixies, Sir had immense pleasure in making snide comments about them and his predicament. Harry thought it rather odd that a disembodied voice could laugh at other's situations but chose not to say anything.

The corridor empty, Harry darted out and ran round the corner of the next hall. What he did not think about, was the chance that Nymph would be there stooped to pick something up off the ground. He ended up vaulting over her and landing sprawled across the ground before a red headed girl, who had obviously just picked herself up from a pixie attack.

Groaning at the bruises he knew would form by tomorrow, Harry rose from the floor, ignoring Nymph's cackle of laughter at him. After inspecting the red head, Harry could tell that she had to be another Weasley. She had red hair, freckles and was wearing what appeared to be hand-me-down robes. She definitely fitted the Weasley criteria.

"So Jerry," said Nymph, still laughing. "What brings you to our neck of the castle?"

He glowered. "Same thing that probably brought you here. Some *idiots* released pixies everywhere and I'm staying away from them." He knew perfectly well that the Weasley girl and Nymph knew who the culprits were behind the mass pixy release. He also knew that his derisive tone in regards to the twins would drive the Weasley into rash anger.

Surprisingly, the girl did not do anything towards him but rather directed her anger at Nymph, who was still stooped, searching through a bag on the ground. "Would you stop that? It's *mine!*"

"I know it's your," said Nymph bluntly. "I just wanted to know what type of rubbish your parents tried to afford this year."

Shaking his head and knowing that there was nothing he could or would do to stop Nymph from doing whatever it was she wanted to do, Harry bade her farewell. He only looked derisively at the Weasley in parting.

It took several days for the staff to fully rid the castle of pixies. Classes were cancelled until such time had passed. The Weasley twins were found to have no evidence against them and went unpunished, much to the annoyance of every occupant in the castle. To Harry's delight, however, he found that the Room did not get infested with the fiendish beasties. He spent the majority of his time in

hiding learning from Sir, though he did find it irksome when Nymph demanded to know where he had been and did not take “around the castle” as an answer.

By the time Hogwarts was properly hospitable again, it was already the weekend and September was halfway through. Whilst he was sitting at breakfast, happily reading a book he had gotten out of the library on curses, a shadow fell upon his book that was definitely not Nymph's. He looked up at the figure of Draco Malfoy.

“Can I help you?” he drawled, a little annoyed that he was being disturbed so early in the day.

“No,” replied the blonde smoothly. “But if I were you, I'd go watch the Gryffindor Quidditch team practise. Something you see there might... amuse you.”

With that, Malfoy returned to the Slytherin table, leaving Harry to wonder if he was actually crazy. Why should he be interested in Quidditch? He hated the sport. True, his experiences of it had not been great but even before the bludger had decided that he needed knocking off an invisible broom the game had been dull. Nevertheless, after finishing his breakfast (which did not take long), Harry found himself sitting in the stands of the Quidditch pitch. If nothing else, it would provide a new environment to read in.

The Gryffindor team were practising. Harry knew very few of the players' names but that was mostly due to a lack of interest on his part. The Weasley twins were playing as beaters, he saw, and seemed to enjoy whacking their bats at the bludgers. The only other member Harry knew the name of was Wood, the keeper. For a few moments, he watched them fly around and practise their various plays but he quickly got bored. Was this what Malfoy had wanted him to see? It was only the Gryffindors practising; he could see that nearly any day. Harry returned to his book on curses but was quickly distracted by frantic shouts.

The Slytherin Quidditch team were marching onto the field, brooms slung over their shoulders. The Gryffindor team, obviously very disgruntled by this, were flying down to meet them. Malfoy was right; it certainly did look as if it would be very amusing. Harry, along with a

couple of other occupants in the stands, walked down to the pitch to join the two teams to get a better view of the upcoming confrontation.

Just as Harry arrived on the pitch – closely followed by Hermione and some first year – where the Slytherin team were standing, the Gryffindor team landed. Wood, the captain of the team, looked very angry indeed.

“Flint!” Wood bellowed at the Slytherin captain. “This is our practise time! We got up especially! You can clear off now!”

Harry located the member of the Slytherin team that was the captain. The only way to tell him apart was by the “Captain” badge he wore. All the members of the team were large, burly males. The Slytherin team seemed like they chose their members purely for the size of them.

“Plenty of room for all of us, Wood,” replied Flint. The expressions on the opposing team members quickly turned from sour to angry. Malfoy was right; this was fun.

“But I booked the pitch!” said Wood, positively spitting with rage. “I booked it!”

“Ah,” said Flint. “But I’ve got a specially signed note here from Professor Snape. *I, Professor S. Snape, give the Slytherin team permission to practise today on the Quidditch pitch, owing to the need to train their new seeker.*”

“You’ve got a new seeker?” asked Wood distractedly. “Where?”

Harry could see his point. The six large figures that were the Slytherin team did not seem capable of having a seventh member. Somehow, from behind them, a seventh did emerge. It was a smaller boy, smirking all over his pale, pointed face. Malfoy directed his smirk quickly at Harry before turning back to the other Gryffindors.

“Aren’t you Lucius Malfoy’s son?” said one of the twins, looking at Malfoy with dislike.

“Funny you should mention Draco’s father,” said Flint, as the whole Slytherin team smiled still more broadly. “Let me show you the generous gift he’s made to the Slytherin team.”

All seven of the members held out their broomsticks. Even Harry, who did not know much about broomsticks, could tell that they were far better than the Gryffindors’. Some of the Gryffindors’ brooms, especially the Weasley twins, were beaten, bashed and had twigs sticking out of their tails in all manner of directions. The brooms the Slytherins were holding out, were highly polished and very sleek looking indeed.

“Very latest model. Only came out last month,” said Flint carelessly, flicking a peck of dust from the end of his own. “I believe it outstrips the old Two Thousand series by a considerable amount. As for the old Cleansweeps, sweeps the board with them.”

The Gryffindor team were silent, none of them knowing quite what to say to that. Malfoy, however, knew exactly what he wanted to say and turned to Harry. “Good aren’t they, White? It’s *such* a shame the Gryffindor team can’t afford any better.”

All of the members of both the Gryffindor and Slytherin teams turned to look at him in surprise. Evidently, none had noticed his, Hermione’s or the Gryffindor first year’s arrival on the pitch. The Gryffindors narrowed their eyes in suspicion at him whereas the Slytherins merely looked at him guardedly.

“What are you doing here?” asked Flint in alarm. “You’ve not joined the Gryffindor team, have you?”

Harry snorted and gave him an incredulous look. As if he’d join a Quidditch team of his own free will! His only experience of Quidditch and actually being on a broom had hardly been a motivating experience. Add to that the fact that he didn’t like anyone on the team or heights and it was rather obvious that he hadn’t joined the team. Not to mention the fact that he was blatantly not in Quidditch robes and was carrying no broom.

“No,” he said coldly. Even his voice sounded repulsed by the idea.

Flint looked oddly relieved but Wood was still looking suspicious. "What *are* you doing here then? You're not spying on us for *them*, are you?"

Harry barely restrained from throwing a knife at him in frustration. Honestly, there was no need for them to be so suspicious of him. Well, maybe they had slight cause to be suspicious but it was still very irksome. Before he could answer however, one of the twins spoke.

"Relax, Oliver," twin number one said. "He was just watching us practise."

"Yeah," continued the other twin. "He wouldn't spy on us anyway; Jeremy wouldn't sell us out to the Sly-"

In a flash of anger, Harry was before him, a knife pressed firmly against the Weasley's throat. He would have loved to be doing that with a wand instead; it was much more threatening that way but his wand was still in the hands of the Hogwarts staff.

"You," he growled into the sudden silence that had fallen across the pitch. "Know nothing of me. Don't speak of what you don't know. If you were worth more, I might actually do it but you are nothing. Although," Harry said, taking a step backwards and replacing his knife up his sleeve again. "You might be able to raffle off your broomsticks."

"Oh, yes," added in Malfoy, who was the only one who did not appear fazed in the slightest by his display. "I expect a museum would bid for them."

The Slytherin team chuckled slightly but most were still staring at Harry in curiosity.

"At least no one in the Gryffindor team had to *buy* their way in," said Hermione sharply, bringing the attention to her. Harry wondered briefly why she was even there. There was certainly no one there who was her friend or even ally, as Malfoy was to him. "*They* got in on pure talent."

Malfoy's smug look flickered a little. Apparently Hermione had touched a nerve. "No one asked your opinion, you filthy little Mudblood," he spat.

Hermione's face crumpled and she looked at Harry as if in search of support. But it was in vain. He felt sorry for her, yes, but there was nothing he was prepared to do for her. She should have kept her head down and not spoken if she did not want to be noticed. If Harry did anything for her, she would assume that he wanted to be friends with her, which he definitely did not. It was hard enough forcing the Weasley twins to stay away from him. If Dumbledore found that he had friends, there was no telling what would happen to them. Nymph was already in enough trouble.

A lot of things happened in very few seconds. Hermione's face crumpled further at the lack of support from Harry and she burst into tears. Flint had to dive in front of Malfoy to keep Fred and George from leaping on him. One of the Gryffindor chasers shrieked, "*How dare you!*" at Malfoy. Wood had drawn his wand and flung a curse at Malfoy, which Flint countered with one of his own. In a matter of moments, a full out brawl between both teams had begun, catching Harry in the crossfire.

The older members of both teams began duelling at once but the seekers of both teams did not bother with wands. Malfoy had dived in Harry's direction to avoid being hit by a spell and the Gryffindor seeker, whose name Harry did not know, dove right after him to punch him squarely in the jaw. Malfoy and he began exchanging blows but the Gryffindor was not terribly accurate with his fists and ended up hitting Harry in the stomach instead of Malfoy when the blonde ducked left, which Harry was more than happy to return. Spells were flying through the air, Hermione was shrieking from the sidelines and the Gryffindor first year was, strangely enough, taking pictures of the scene.

It was not long before a teacher arrived on the scene. Unfortunately, it was Lockhart. The first thing he did was call, "Boys, boys! And girls, excuse me. This is not proper decorum for a Quidditch pitch! I shall have to ask that you cease at once!" Needless to say, this did nothing to the tangle of spells that was flying back and forth. Lockhart then

did the unthinkable. He attempted to cast a spell that would freeze them all in place.

"Frolta cassium!"

Instead of freezing in place like Lockhart had intended, each of the fifteen involved in the fight and Lockhart himself, were thrown twenty feet through the air in all directions. Harry landed heavily on his back, hitting his head off the ground as he did so. He groaned. Already he could feel the blood starting to trickle down the back of his head.

"If I were you I'd heal that before any of the teachers get here," Sir said. It wasn't so much as a suggestion as an order. *"We've seen the adverse effects potions have when you've taken your appearance potion before and, quite frankly, I'm getting tired of seeing you repeat your mistakes."*

Harry snorted but did as he asked. Concentrating, he wandlessly and wordlessly cast a spell that would knit the skin back together and stop the bleeding. Then, still without having moved from the ground, he rid himself of the various cuts and scratches that had appeared when he scraped a few inches along the ground on impact. Feeling a little tired but otherwise uninjured, Harry got up from his position on the ground and saw that he was the second to last to do so but was without a doubt the least injured.

The injuries varied slightly depending on what direction the person had flown. For instance, Lockhart, having flown backwards, looked uninjured when only looking at his front but while looking at his back Harry could see that chunks of his hair had been torn out and there was a large gash on the back of his neck. He was also holding his wand arm gingerly, presumably having injured it. Everyone else was glaring at him.

Well, that wasn't strictly true. The little Gryffindor first year, who Harry heard one of the chaser's call Colin, was still lying in a heap where he had flown and hit the base of one of the goal hoops. Harry paid the little boy little attention; Madam Pomfrey would fix him right up as soon as she got her hands on him. What he was concerned with, however, was Professor Snape and Professor McGonagall who were marching towards them, both appearing very angry indeed.

The two Quidditch teams (and Hermione) banded together back into their groups. Each went forward and took their broom and had separated by the time that McGonagall and Snape had reached them. It was rather odd from Harry's point of view, being the only person apart from Colin that had not joined one side of the students. It was like there was an invisible barrier in between the two groups preventing them from getting within four feet of each other, let alone associating with them. Yes, the two groups were odd but he looked oddest of all, standing on his own resolutely refusing to join either side.

Snape immediately went to the Slytherin side of the pupils and started reprimanding them in a cold, quiet voice. McGonagall went straight to the Gryffindors grouped together and did not bother to hide her shouting. Both teachers seemed to have missed the fact that Harry was there at all and Lockhart was busy standing over Colin and looked to be prodding him with his toe. Harry shrugged at the backs of all three teachers and gave a cheerful wave at the two groups of students before walking away, completely unnoticed.

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Unfortunately for Harry, Dumbledore was not as ignorant of his participation in the events at the Quidditch pitch as McGonagall and Snape were. No doubt he had used legilimency on the students as they told their version of events in the Hospital Wing and seen him. It did not matter that it was completely unethical and an invasion of privacy; Harry was certain that the headmaster would have had no second thoughts about using such a technique. This being the case, it had been inevitable that Harry end up in his office for the third time since school had started again.

"Harry," began Dumbledore after he had summoned Harry into his office. "I want you to know that I am very disappointed in you. Yet again, you have failed to abide by school rules and have participated in forbidden activities. You cannot possibly claim ignorance on this matter. I have lost count of the number of times I have had to speak to you about fighting on school grounds – or *without* school grounds," Dumbledore added as an afterthought. "*This* time, I shall only deduct twenty house points and issue you with a week's worth of detention,

as I have done for the other perpetrators. If I find you behaving in such a manner in the future, I shall not hesitate to expel you.”

In shock, Harry almost met his eyes. Dumbledore was going to *expel* him? That didn’t make any sense though. If Dumbledore expelled him, he would not be able to be used as a weapon against the Dark Lord and was in “danger” away from Hogwarts. There was no way the old man could keep an eye on him if he was allowed to leave Hogwarts, on his command no less. It didn’t even make a relative of sense.

“Upon your expulsion,” continued Dumbledore sternly. “I shall coincidentally find Harry Potter and instate him into the school. No one will know that you are Jeremy White and you will be given a clean slate. *That* will be your *last* chance.”

“You can’t do that!”

If Dumbledore made him into Harry Potter again, then everyone would be bothering him incessantly. He had worked so hard so that no one would become friends with him and be used against him by Dumbledore (or the Dark Lord if ever he made a reappearance). If he was Harry Potter, he was sure that there would be people who wanted revenge on him for the feat he had done as an infant. Surely Dumbledore realised that it would be much easier to extract his revenge upon him if he remained Jeremy White?

“*Oh yes he can.*”

Harry was tempted to snarl “*Oh no he can’t,*” at Sir but refrained himself, not only for the oddity that it would appear to Dumbledore.

“Oh yes I can, Mr Potter! You are dismissed.”

Hissing furiously, Harry stormed out of the office and down the staircase. It hadn’t even been his fault that he had been fighting! Dumbledore had no right to decide what was or wasn’t good for him. For an old man trying to gain Harry’s favour, Dumbledore was doing a really poor job. But then something pulled him out of his thoughts. Something very peculiar indeed.

"Come... come to me... let me rip you... let me tear you... let me kill you..."

Harry gave a startled jump and pressed his back against the nearest wall, frantically glancing up and down the empty corridor in search of the voice. It hadn't been Sir; that was for sure. No, this voice was a voice to chill the bone-marrow, a voice of breath-taking, ice-cold venom."

"Boy, what are you doing?" asked Sir. Harry jumped again.

"Didn't you hear it?"

"And what, precisely, am I supposed to have heard?"

"That voice! Didn't you hear it?"

"No, I did not hear it. Now, if you wouldn't mind, stop acting like such a fool."

Oh great, thought Harry sarcastically. Not only did he hear one voice that no one else could hear (Sir) and see and *converse* with a centaur that no one else could see (Jacques), he now heard a voice that not even the voice only he could hear could hear. That was just *typical*. Maybe he was going insane...

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Time began to pass a little more amiably after that. Harry served his various detentions and was careful only to receive a couple more. He did not hear the strange voice again. Nymph managed to keep herself under relative control and only got into a couple of fights when people startled her. The Weasley twins did not bother him and Malfoy only talked with him a couple of times. Things ran smoothly throughout nearly the whole of October. Then Halloween came.

Harry was making his way down to the feast, along with everyone else, when suddenly, he wasn't. He blinked. This wasn't where he had been a second ago. He had been just round the corner of the portrait of the Fat Lady a moment ago and now he... wasn't. Now he was on the second floor. He frowned. How had he gotten here? It

hadn't felt like portkey or apparating or even floo. It had been literally mid-step and a blink of an eye and his surroundings had changed. It hadn't felt like he had even moved. His surroundings hadn't moved either. They had just... changed.

That wasn't right though. Even at Hogwarts, People didn't just disappear from one place and reappear in another with no idea how they had gotten there. Something wasn't right.

Sighing, Harry knew that he wouldn't be able to solve the mystery by doing nothing. He could sort it out after the feast. He glanced at his watch and staggered back in surprise. According to his watch, the feast was already finishing. No, that wasn't right either. The feast hadn't begun yet. Or had it? His watch seemed to be ticking without hindrance. Maybe Nymph had changed it to confuse him.

Or maybe the feast *was* ending and he had somehow just lost several hours of his life. That *definitely* wasn't normal. People didn't just lose hours of their life and go places without realising it. Maybe he had blacked out for some reason or blocked out his memories. But why would he do that? There was no reason for it. It didn't feel like a memory charm should. If a memory charm had been cast or something of the same effect had happened to him, he wouldn't remember or notice that he had memories missing.

Unless he *was* going crazy. It made sense, when he thought about it. Harry heard two different voices in his head and could see centaurs that weren't there. He didn't even want to think about the spirit that had inhabited the back of Quirrell's head. Maybe that hadn't been there either. Maybe everything was just his imagination. Maybe magic wasn't even real and he had been hallucinating for over a year.

Angrily, Harry shook himself out of these thoughts. He was *not* going crazy and he was *not* hallucinating. He was just as sane as anyone else. He merely had... differences. That didn't dismiss the fact that he *had* somehow lost several hours of his life without noticing.

Frowning and feeling somewhat worried, Harry set off along the hall in the direction of Gryffindor Tower. Suddenly, or perhaps not so suddenly considering the hours that had passed, he wasn't feeling so

hungry. He slowed his walk considerably at the sight further along the corridor, however. He went cautiously forwards to investigate.

Something was shining on the wall ahead. He approached, squinting in the darkness. Foot-high words had been daubed on the wall between two windows, shimmering in the light cast by the flaming torches that adorned the walls.

THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN OPENED.

ENEMIES OF THE HEIR, BEWARE.

As he edged nearer, Harry almost slipped. There was a large puddle of water on the floor. He inched towards the message, eyes fixed on a dark shadow beneath it. It was Mrs Norris, Filch's cat, hanging by her tail from a torch bracket. She was stiff as a board, her eyes wide and staring.

Harry stood transfixed, unable to tear his eyes away from the cat, his own worries forgotten. What had happened to her?

A rumble from below told him that the feast had just ended. From either end of the corridor came the sound of hundreds of feet climbing the stairs, and the loud, happy talk of well-fed people. The next moment, students were crashing into the passage from both ends.

Everyone went silent as they saw the hanging cat. Harry stood alone, in the middle of the corridor, the attention of the masses fixed upon him.

"Enemies of the heir, beware! You'll be next, Mudbloods!" And, of course, Malfoy *would* be the one to break the quiet and incriminate Harry further.

"What's going on here? What's going on?" Filch had obviously been attracted by the shouts of Malfoy. His face turned a most interesting shade of red when he saw Mrs Norris hanging by her tail.

"My cat! My cat! What's happened to Mrs Norris?" he shrieked. Then he spotted Harry. "*You! You!*"

Yes me, thought Harry bitterly. Who else could it have been but the first to discover the crime? His luck really was turning for the worse. Then again, when had it been good?

“You’ve murdered my cat! You’ve killed her! I’ll kill you! I’ll –“

“Argus!”

To put the icing on the cake, there was Dumbledore, followed by a number of other teachers. He looked... less than pleased at the scene before him. He did not speak again for several moments and simply stared at Harry coldly. Unfortunately for him, Nymph chose the most inappropriate time to speak.

“Caw, Jerry!” she cried. He knew her to be in jest immediately but unfortunately, no one else knew her mannerisms well enough to be able to tell. They all took her seriously as she said, “I didn’t think you was being serious when you said you’d do it!”

If anything could have made the situation worse, it was that. Harry had a feeling that his life had just taken a large turn for the worse.

“Come with me, Mister White,” said Dumbledore coldly. “You too, Argus.”

Lockhart stepped forward eagerly. “My office is nearest, Headmaster – just upstairs – please feel free –“

Dumbledore’s mere nod was enough to cut him off. He was not a happy man. The silent crowd parted to let them pass. Lockhart, looking excited and important, hurried after Dumbledore along with Snape and McGonagall.

They were silent as they entered Lockhart’s office. Harry had only eyes for the still form of the cat. The teachers had only eyes for the cat and Harry.

Dumbledore laid the cat on Lockhart’s desk and began to examine her morbidly. The tip of Dumbledore’s long, crooked nose was barely an inch from Mrs Norris’s fur. He was looking at her closely through his half-moon spectacles, his long fingers gently prodding and poking.

McGonagall was bent almost as close, her eyes narrowed. Snape loomed behind them, half in shadow (which did not help him appear any less like a bat), wearing a most peculiar expression. It was as though he was trying hard not to smile. Lockhart was making stupid suggestions, as he always did.

It took a long time for Dumbledore to straighten and fix Harry with his cold stare again. So long, in fact, that Harry was sure his insides were trying to escape him with all their wriggling.

"She is not dead," he said to the room. "Merely petrified."

Filch looked very relieved, though he did not stop his glaring at Harry.

"Did you do it?" Dumbledore asked Harry. His voice was colder and angrier than he had ever heard before.

"I –" stuttered Harry feebly. Had he done it? There was no way to tell, really. For all he knew, he might have. He had no idea what he had done in the past few hours. "I –"

"You were not at the feast," added Snape silkily. "And were found alone at the scene of the crime."

Harry swallowed.

"*Did. You. Do. It,*" repeated Dumbledore. Even without looking into them, Harry knew his eyes were blazing.

"I –" he said again. He was just making himself look guiltier and guiltier with all his stuttering. He needed to deny it. "I – no."

"Rubbish!" snarled Filch. "He did it! You saw what he wrote on the wall! *He killed my cat!*"

"I am afraid," said Dumbledore, still in his cold, chilling voice. "That I am going to have to expel you, Mister White."

Harry looked forlornly at the floor. He could almost hear Snape mentally cheering, "Yes!"

Harry glowered at the students before him.

He had, of course, fought tooth and nail to try and prevent Dumbledore from expelling him and reinstating him as Harry Potter but it had been to no avail. Every argument he could have possibly thought of had been used but Dumbledore had been prepared for them all. The first thing he had tried was to deny any part that Dumbledore thought he had.

"But I didn't do it! Who are you going to believe, me or Filch?"

"You have shown your trustworthiness in the past. I do not think that question deserves an answer."

"Indeed," added Snape. "If you had no part in it, where were you during the feast?"

Not having an answer to his question, Harry's argument did not help prove his innocence. He had changed his tactics slightly.

"I'm not doing it. I'm not going to be Harry Potter. You can't make me."

Okay, so it was a slightly juvenile way of arguing, but it had been worth a try. The only thing it had resulted in was Dumbledore waving his wand and banishing the effects of the appearance potion Harry had taken to make him look like Jeremy was supposed to. Dumbledore even got rid of the green highlights that were still in his hair.

"Now you have no option but to become yourself."

"I'll tell them that I was Jeremy! You don't want that, do you?"

"And who do you expect would believe you? I shall be talking to any who already know of your duo identities. In any case, I will be taking precautions so that you are unable to tell anyone."

“But what about my wand? It would be really suspicious if Harry Potter wasn’t allowed to keep his own wand.”

“I will be giving it back to you when you rejoin your peers. Even without it you seem to be capable of getting into trouble. When you have it again, you will not be using it for anything untoward or there will be serious consequences.”

“What more can you possibly do? You’ve already expelled me! Wait a minute, I didn’t have my wand when Mrs Norris was attacked – how could I have petrified her?”

“We both know there are other ways you could have done it.”

“But won’t it look a little too coincidental if Harry Potter just magically appears as soon as Jeremy White is expelled?”

Dumbledore smiled.

In truth, Harry did *not* know any other way he could have petrified a cat. He didn’t even know how to petrify one even with his wand; how was he have supposed to have done it? After thinking it over, the only logical solution was that Dumbledore knew he had no idea how to have committed said crime. That would mean that he was just using it as an excuse to get what he wanted – again. Dumbledore really was quite bad at the “getting Harry to like him” thing.

Harry had not returned to his dorm room that night. He had been forced to spend it in a bedroom somewhere in the castle (he was too tired to pay attention where). It turned out that Dumbledore had thought that it *would* be too coincidental if he reappeared the moment he was expelled and so had decided that he would spend three weeks in solitude, which apparently would also serve as a punishment for him. Harry hadn’t really understood how Dumbledore expected him to stay at Hogwarts for three weeks unseen until the next morning. He woke up in the strange new room to find a note on the bedside table.

Harry,

Whilst you were sleeping, I took the liberty of placing multiple spells upon you. These will prevent you from speaking to anyone other than

a teacher during your three week period of isolation. I have also added spells to monitor your whereabouts and others to alert me should you attempt to remove any of the previously mentioned spells. As an added precaution, I have added spells that will alert me if these should be attempted to be removed also. On top of your trunk, which I have had fetched from your dormitory, you will find an invisibility cloak. Your father left it in my possession before he died. I have also added a spell to this which will prevent you from removing it in public. I would like for you to use it to attend breakfast.

I do this with only your best interests in mind.

Professor Dumbledore.

Fury filled Harry. The headmaster was dictating his every move like he was some misbehaving toddler. Dumbledore had no right to dictate what he would or wouldn't do – much less pile spells upon him like he was a magical artefact needing warding against being stolen. He had also kept something from him that should have rightfully been Harry's: his father's invisibility cloak. It was not as if the headmaster had never had an opportunity to give it to him.

After asking Sir about the spells placed upon him, Harry was told, *"The headmaster certainly does seem overly precautious, doesn't he? It would take weeks to work out which spell to remove first, let alone actually dissipate them without his knowledge. Especially without a wand. It would be a lot easier if the headmaster had given you your wand back already."*

Not because Dumbledore had told him to but because he was curious *why* he had been told to, Harry had put on the invisibility cloak and headed down to breakfast, where he was currently glowering at the students before him. Every singly one of them was talking about him. Harry was seated at the end of the Gryffindor table (he had no wish to be sat on by some wayward student) and there was not one conversation he could hear about any topic other than him.

"So, do you think he did it?"

“Of course! No one saw him at the feast and you heard what that Lestranger girl said when he was found there. I heard he didn’t even return to his dormitory.”

“I hope they expelled him. It would serve him right, too. I can’t believe Professor Dumbledore let him stay as long as he did. Just think of all the things he’s done!”

Harry tuned them out and turned to push his food around his plate. He wasn’t really hungry. Who would be in his position? It occurred to him that it would look really odd to anyone that glanced over at his empty place. All they would see was food moving itself round the plate. Dumbledore had probably put a spell to prevent them seeing anything he moved. Either that or the headmaster assumed that they would just put it down to the irregularity that was Hogwarts. Just when Harry thought he had had quite enough of breakfast and the students around him, Dumbledore stood up to speak, creating immediate silence as he did so.

“As I am sure you are all aware,” he began solemnly. “Last night there was an attack on Mr Filch’s cat, Mrs Norris. Mrs Norris was not killed, thankfully, but it will take some time for a cure to be made to free her from her petrified state. A message was found on the wall but I want to assure you that it is pure fiction. There is no truth on the statement found on the wall. Furthermore, Mister Jeremy White, a second year Gryffindor, has been expelled for his participation in the events. Let him be an example to all who might consider committing a similar crime.”

As soon as the headmaster sat down again, the hall erupted into excited chatter. Evidently no one had been expelled in some time. Harry’s opinion of the students near by did not improve as he listened in to what they were saying. Most of them were expressing thoughts of joy that he had vacated the school and would never be seen again. Others were thankful that he wasn’t still there to attack students with the monster from the Chamber of Secrets. There were a few that were, at least, merely inquisitive.

“Dumbledore wouldn’t have expelled him,” Weasley twin number two was saying to number one.

“Unless he actually did it,” countered the other twin.

“No, I don’t think Dumbledore would have expelled him even then,” replied Fred (at least Harry thought it was Fred). “Think of who he is! If he’d done it, then Dumbledore would want him close at hand.”

“Yeah, maybe... but then where is he?”

“Dunno but Dumbledore must have something planned.”

Across the hall, Malfoy and Nymph were whispering furiously to each other. Malfoy was probably blaming Nymph for his expulsion, if they believed it. Harry didn’t really blame Nymph; Dumbledore would have probably assumed it was him anyway. Besides that, it wasn’t her fault. She just had an... odd sense of humour. Blinking in surprise, Harry watched as she stood up.

“What you do that for?” she called out, drawing the attention of the whole hall. “He didn’t do nothing wrong!” Harry smiled, feeling an odd sense of loyalty towards her.

“Miss Lestranger,” said Dumbledore calmly. “We do not condone the behaviour that Mister White applied nor do we condone the behaviour of yourself at Hogwarts. Sit down.”

“But he didn’t do it!” she cried viciously, not paying the headmaster any heed. “You expelled him for nothing! You’re just using last night as an excuse to do what *you* wants!”

Dumbledore looked less than happy now. His eyes were staring coldly at Nymph and he was frowning slightly. “I assure you that is not the case. I had warned Mister white of his expulsion should he continue to break school rules and his participation in the events concerning Mrs Norris more than do so. He was not expelled without just cause. Sit down, or I shall have to deduct points.”

Nymph remained standing. Harry could almost hear her thinking, “*Let him deduct points. See if I cares.*” Again he felt an overwhelming sense of loyalty towards her. She was such a good friend sometimes, even if she did fight back when it was useless. “He *didn’t* do it,

though! I were just kidding last night! If you expelled him, you'll have to –"

She never finished her sentence. Harry, foreseeing where she was going, had risen to his feet and flung some toast at her which hit her directly in the face. If she had finished her sentence with "you'll have to expel me too!" like he thought she was going to, he was certain Dumbledore would have taken advantage of the situation and done just that. Nymph would have been sent packing on her own, never knowing that Dumbledore had only expelled his persona.

"Who threw that?" she demanded, after wiping the jam off her face with her sleeve.

Every table, Gryffindor included, turned to glance about them in search of the culprit. Most knew that it was someone at the Gryffindor table but there was no way for them to tell who had thrown the toast with Harry being invisible. Dumbledore knew, though. The headmaster was staring directly at him and Harry stared back defiantly. There was no way the old fool could punish him, not in front of so many witnesses; it would ruin his "master plan". The headmaster seemed to settle for staring at him disapprovingly.

"So be it," growled Nymph, narrowing her eyes. In a flash, she had grabbed the whole stack of toast from the middle of the Slytherin table and lobbed it at the Gryffindors, who were only too happy to retaliate. Within moments, every last student was involved in a massive food fight throughout the entire Great Hall. The teachers were rendered useless in their attempts to prevent them.

Amid the chaos that had begun to reign, Harry walked calmly out of the hall.

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The time between Harry's isolation and his rejoining the school passed incredibly slowly. There was no one he could talk to apart from Sir and Sir was never a great conversationalist. Aside from think about his lack of conversation, there was very little that Harry could do. He ended up spending a large amount of time in the library reading and he even went to class once or twice just so he could

amuse himself by watching his peers' failing attempts at casting one spell or another. He even got so bored that he simply sat at the top of a staircase and spent the afternoon tripping up anyone who happened to pass by. Another time he ventured into the Forbidden Forest and was at peace there until he had been unfortunate enough to be discovered by a snarling animal of some sort. He had vacated the forest shortly afterwards. They were perhaps three of the duller weeks of Harry's life.

The weeks seemed to stretch on and on but at last they passed by and one morning Harry woke up with another note placed on his bedside table.

Harry,

Tonight at dinner, I shall introduce you to the rest of the school and you shall be sorted as Harry Potter. Whilst you were sleeping again, I took it upon myself to place another spell on you that will prevent you from telling anyone, who does not already know, of your time as Jeremy White. At dinner, I shall remove the other spells upon you and you will be free to talk to the other pupils once more. You will receive your wand tomorrow morning before classes start. I hope that this time around you shall consider the rules of the school before you act. Any behaviour of misconduct of any sort will be severely punished.

Again, I am only acting with your best interests in mind.

Professor Dumbledore.

The day could hardly pass quickly enough for Harry. Strangely enough, he found himself very excited at the prospect of returning to the main body of the school. He was shocked at this excitement until he realised it was not for the joy of seeing all his... amiable peers but for the prospect of being able to talk with Nymph again. One time during his three weeks of solitude he had actually attempted to speak to her but he had been overcome with the need to cough and had begun choking on his words, quite literally.

At long last, the evening arrived. Dumbledore had ordered that everyone be at dinner at the same time, Harry knew from eavesdropping on a couple of Hufflepuff first year girls, but they had

not been told the reason for this. Harry surmised that the headmaster would want to make a great show of “finding” Harry Potter and having him sorted at Hogwarts. He had, after all, been missing for years.

The hall was filled with chattering students, from what Harry could hear. He had been told by McGonagall that he was to wait in a chamber that led into the Great Hall while the headmaster introduced him. He didn't like the idea of walking in with every eye upon him (again) but he knew there was no alternative for him. Dumbledore evaded every negotiation that he attempted to make. It was all Harry could do to wait nervously with his ear pressed against the door so that he could hear what the headmaster was saying.

A hush fell and Dumbledore began to speak. “It is my great pleasure to inform you all that we have a new addition to our school, for perhaps the first time in over a hundred years. He has been spending the past month or so being tutored privately so that he is up to speed with others that will be in his year. It is only recently that he was found with no knowledge of the magical world in a remote area in muggle London. I must ask, therefore, that you do not question him on where he has been these past few years as he may not wish to talk about it. That said, it gives me great pleasure to introduce to you, Harry Potter!”

Harry jumped back from the door, realising that this was his moment to enter. He found the story that Dumbledore had created for him somewhat ridiculous and basic but knew that he could not contradict it now. He walked through the door in a would-be calm attitude, ready to face the hundreds of eyes that would be staring at him and the many heads, craning to get a good look at him.

As he entered, there was a collective gasp and murmurs sprang up all over the hall. The only eyes Harry met were the Weasley twins', to assure them that this new acknowledged identity meant nothing had changed between them, Malfoy's, to assure him that the situation was not his doing, and Nymph's, to share a look of forlorn.

“Mister Potter will now be sorted,” announced Dumbledore over the students' murmurs. “Professor McGonagall? The Sorting Hat?”

McGonagall nodded and disappeared for a moment only to return carrying a three legged stool with the Sorting Hat upon it. She placed it in front of Harry and motioned for him to try it on. Harry slid onto the stool and closed his eyes as the hat dropped over them. A familiar voice moaned in his ear.

“Oh no! Not *you* again!”

"Oh no!" moaned the Sorting Hat in Harry's ear. "Not you again!"

Harry frowned at the insides of the hat, feeling somewhat affronted. What was that supposed to mean? It was the hat's own fault; it had wanted to sort him again at the beginning of the year. If it didn't want to sort him, it shouldn't have asked. "Hey! What d'you mean by that?"

"No," said the hat stubbornly. "No, I refuse to sort you again. Once was bad enough; you can stay where I put you before."

"What? But it's your job to sort people! What happened to "bound to sort all those who ought be sorted" or whatever it was?" Hats really were so fickle these days.

"I lied. Go back to Gryffindor."

"*Just do your job, hat,*" commanded Sir.

Harry began to wonder how long he had already been sitting under the hat *this* time. It was probably already quite long compared to the length of time it took some people to be sorted. It wasn't his fault that the hat didn't want to sort him again. Really it was Dumbledore's fault for putting it in that situation again. Somehow, Harry did not really think that the hat was going to be blaming Dumbledore for its predicament.

"Don't talk to me like that, *Sir,*" said the hat haughtily. "I should tell Dumbledore about you."

"You won't," said Harry threateningly. "Because if you do, I will make sure that a dog somewhere gets a very active chew toy." The hat said nothing. "So are you going to sort me or not?"

"I already told you, no." It paused. "I see you aren't going anywhere until I have. I suppose I can sort you again since you've changed so much." Well that was odd; he didn't know that hats used sarcasm. "I'm only going to do it if you're a bit more decisive this time, though. But this is the last time!"

Harry smiled. After several moments of already sitting in the spotlight, he was about to *begin* to get sorted. Honestly, if he didn't know any better, he'd have said that the Sorting Hat was procrastinating because it got lonely in Dumbledore's office.

"Right, then, let's see what we have here *this* time! Quite a brilliant mind you've developed; you certainly have been studying, haven't you? You seek more knowledge and are eager to learn. Yes, Ravenclaw would suit you well this time."

A faint hope glimmered inside of Harry at the prospect that this was his sorting over already but he knew it wasn't. The hat had gone through all the houses trying to sort him the last time; there was no reason why it should not do so again. Indeed, chances were, the hat was going to spend as much time as it could pondering over his decision no matter what he said to urge it on. Perhaps the hat really *did* get too lonely in Dumbledore's office.

"As hardworking as you are, I really doubt that Hufflepuff would benefit with you in their house. Yes, you are quite against the idea also. Very well, let us look at our other options shall we? Slytherin might suit you well. You have much ambition, though I cannot say that I approve of some of your aspirations. Nevertheless, the ambition is there and you certainly have cunning enough to fit in well in that house. You would have many friends and allies should you be sorted into Slytherin. Indeed, you could be great and Slytherin would help you on your way to greatness."

Harry sighed impatiently. The thorough summary of his being surely couldn't be necessary to sort him, especially since the hat had already fulfilled the task once. Although, did it really count when the hat had decided through a random spin? It couldn't spend this much time over everyone. Malfoy had been sorted within a section. He supposed he should feel honoured that he was such a special case but somehow Harry couldn't muster the feeling from within him. Apparently he wasn't the only one impatient. He could distinctly hear conversation from what must have been every person in the Great Hall.

“Hmm, Gryffindor, too, would suit you well. You have plenty of bravery – that goes without saying – and despite what some might say, you did succeed in settling in there before. That leaves only the question of, what do *you* want? I’m not deciding until I get some form of input from you this time. I have no qualms about making this the longest sorting Hogwarts will ever see.”

Somehow, Harry thought he might have already achieved that honour but that wasn’t his task at hand to think about. The hat raised an interesting question. What *did* he want? Being in the same house as Nymph would certainly be a positive aspect of being in Slytherin. It would probably keep him sane to have a friend in the same house, not that she wasn’t vocal enough already. On the other hand, Malfoy was also in Slytherin and Harry would be hard pressed to put up with him so often, not to mention all the other Slytherins who might not take too kindly to him being in their house. He had, after all, defeated their Dark Lord.

Hufflepuff... well the idea was laughable. He entirely agreed with the hat when it had said that he wouldn’t do well there. Ravenclaw wouldn’t be too bad, however. There was no one he felt outright hatred for there but the thought of being surrounded by bookish study-hard people wasn’t too appealing. Sure, he read a lot but he didn’t take much pleasure in it, like Ravenclaws. He read simply out of necessity. If he was ever to extract his revenge properly against Dumbledore then he needed to learn as much as he could.

Gryffindor, now there was an idea. Once already he had endured their irritating ways. It was debatable whether the Weasley twins would leave him alone now that he was Harry Potter again and no longer Jeremy. Then again, they hadn’t exactly left him alone before, either. Hermione would probably ignore him, what with his “Mudblood” comment. He cringed a little at the memory. It had been a little harsh but it had been necessary. Things would have been a lot more difficult if he had one of Dumbledore’s loyal supporters constantly bothering him. Now there was at least one of them out of his hair. Would he be able to keep from being driven insane if he went back into Gryffindor?

Maybe he was thinking about his house the wrong way; he hadn't really managed to decide anything other than that he didn't want to go in Hufflepuff. Harry turned his thoughts to a different angle. He might not have had any friends in Ravenclaw but he was –

“GRYFFINDOR!”

“*What?*” Harry yelped in alarm into the hat. “But I hadn't decided where I wanted to go yet! You said you weren't sorting me until I had an opinion about it!”

“I think you'll agree that we'd waited long enough. Besides, you *did* have an opinion about it; you just might not have realised it yet. *Do* come and talk to me sometime, however. It gets awfully lonely being a hat.”

Before Harry could even think about replying, the hat was lifted from his head by McGonagall and he was met with the cheering faces of the population of Hogwarts. Even the teachers who had known him as Jeremy were clapping enthusiastically. Heck, even *Malfoy* was clapping and Harry hadn't even been sorted into his house. Oh the joys of being him.

Gryffindor, oh what a joyous house. It was not without trepidation that Harry meandered over to their table – again. There were only three persons sitting there that were not cheering with great enthusiasm and Harry was mirroring their attitude. They were, of course, Hermione, who was simply staring at him, and the Weasley twins, who were clapping politely but whispering to each other speculatively as they did so. Just when he thought he had been free of them, Harry was thrown right back at the Gryffindors.

What had the hat been thinking? Harry hadn't even chosen to go to the Gryffindor house again and yet, it had still planted him there again. Now he had to put up with the house for another five and a half years of schooling. If he didn't get expelled again, that was. There wasn't really that much of a chance that Dumbledore would expel him again, even if he petrified pupils “again”. Harry frowned suddenly as he sat down at the Gryffindor table in the only available seat, right in the middle of the throng. Dumbledore wouldn't expel him again and he had just about used every punishment known to man on him. What

more could there possibly be? This being the case, why shouldn't he, Harry, take advantage of the situation and use it to flex the rules a bit? After all, if he was not going to be punished for any acts of misconduct, there was no reason he should not perform them. With this realisation in mind, Harry turned and smirked up at the teachers' table. Oh yes, he was going to have his revenge on Dumbledore for this.

Turning his attention to those surrounding him, Harry put on a relatively pleasant face. Let the teachers and select few who knew him as Jeremy think he had found the error of his ways and amended his attitude. Let them think he wanted to be their saviour. Let them think he had become the model student. He would show them.

"So how hard did you have to work to catch up?" asked Dean from across the table, whilst helping himself to some sausages.

"Pretty hard," said Harry conversationally. "I'm perfectly up to speed now though, so there shouldn't be any problems. So what's Hogwarts like?" He was hoping someone would bring Jeremy up; it would certainly be interesting to see what they said about him now that he wasn't there.

"Oh, Hogwarts is great," said Lee Jordan, who was sitting slightly further down the table.

"Even better now that White's been expelled," Ron mumbled bitterly. Harry had the displeasure of sitting on Ron's left.

"Quidditch?" Harry blinked in surprise. He hadn't meant to say that. He hadn't even been thinking about Quidditch. He had tried to ask "White?" but the words had choked in his throat. It had felt like he had regurgitated the word Quidditch. He frowned and tried again. "Did you like Quidditch?"

What the hell? He had definitely *not* tried to say that. Something wasn't right – again – and a quick glance up at the staff table proved that correct. Dumbledore was staring directly at him. Perfect, just perfect. Apparently, there was a spell on him preventing him talking about Jeremy. He didn't really mind the fact that he couldn't talk about his alias but the fact that Dumbledore felt it necessary to

prevent him even mentioning his name was a bit much. He hated being restricted, especially when it was completely uncalled for. Well, maybe this instance wasn't *completely* uncalled for but Harry still didn't like it.

To his annoyance, those sitting round about him proceeded to engage him in a lively talk about Quidditch which Harry, with his current objective in mind, was obliged to join in. How anyone could be so excited about such a ridiculous sport was beyond him. Unfortunately, the topic managed to continue on its way all throughout dinner and Harry was only reprieved at the end of the meal. Letting his housemates "show him the way" he ducked back so he drew level with Fred and George.

"This changes nothing," hissed Harry out of the corner of his mouth. "I am not your friend and you will desist in any attempts to be... *friendly*. I *will* silence you if I have to."

Fred and George said nothing and Harry walked up ahead to where his "guides" were.

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As usual, Harry woke early in the morning and made his way to the Room to learn under the... *interesting* teachings of Sir. It felt great to be able to do so with his wand again. Not that he used it much, quite the contrary. Actually, he was just finishing off learning all the first year spells wandlessly and without sound, which was proving to be quite difficult. Nevertheless, it felt good to have his wand back in his possession.

After replacing his black glove on his right hand on his way to breakfast, Harry couldn't help but wonder how many people would make the association between the glove wearing of Harry and Jeremy. It didn't matter to him whether they did or not but to Dumbledore it might be quite a different matter. How interesting it would be to see Dumbledore's reaction to the public outcry that would accompany this revelation, Harry thought with a smirk.

As he ate breakfast, one of the first to do so, Harry pondered over other possible ways to irritate the headmaster. Harmless pranks

wouldn't do. No, that was far too mild. The *Weasley twins* performed pranks; he performed acts of vandalism. So what was serious enough that Dumbledore would know he had done it? What would tell the old fool that it had been a mistake to expel him?

That was it! He had been expelled for his participation in opening the Chamber of Secrets so participate he would. Well, he couldn't participate in whatever the person who had petrified Mrs Norris had done; he had no idea how. Assuming that the culprit had opened the *real* Chamber of Secrets, Harry was merely going to create the illusion that far more damage was being done with it than there actually was. And of course Dumbledore would think that he had done it all.

Brilliant.

The only foreseeable problem Harry could think of was that he had limited knowledge of the Chamber of Secrets. If he knew what sort of creature resided within it, for instance, it would be much easier to pull off the effects of it. Well, that just meant that he would have to do a bit of research before he could fully start on his revenge. No matter, it would give him time to build up his reputation of a reformed criminal.

Luckily for Harry, it was a Saturday. This gave him ample opportunity to visit the library and try to work out what the creature in the Chamber of Secrets could be. It proved harder than he had first anticipated; he wasn't entirely sure why he had thought it would be easy when so many witches and wizards had failed to do so before him. After an hour of searching through books on magical creatures, hoping that the answer would just fling itself at him, he decided to change his approach.

What did he know about the creature? Well, it had been put there by Salazar Slytherin himself so it had to be controlled somehow. He also knew that it petrified cats, which was very helpful, he thought sarcastically. With a resigned sigh, Harry began his search again, this time looking for a creature that could petrify victims. The only thing he found after a half hour of digging his way through heavy tomes, under the watchful eye of Madam Pince, was a strange sea dragon of some kind. The creature could grow to two hundred feet in length, was extremely dangerous and wild and could not exist for longer than a minute outside of the sea, making it also extremely rare. With its wildness, size and inability to leave salt water, Harry really doubted that this was Slytherin's monster.

Maybe the monster didn't petrify any victims but cats. After all, cats might have a strange protection against the monster, though Harry couldn't really see why they would. Perhaps cats were the only animal that was capable of fighting the monster or were greatly feared by it. This time, he searched through many of the books on the high library shelves for a monster that was susceptible to cats. Amongst other equally unlikely possibilities, he found a giant rat king. It was simply a common rat, tail, teeth, the works, but bigger. Much bigger. The giant rat king grew to about the height of Hagrid but one scratch from a cat would kill it. It had no special powers and was so seldom seen it was almost believed a legend. Most of all, however, it could not petrify a cat any more than it could play hockey.

Having spent his whole morning searching in this futile way, he took a break for lunch. He was unwilling to go to the Great Hall and be

badgered the whole time by various Weasleys and other charming individuals such as themselves, however. They would never be able to understand that he, their great saviour, had spent his Saturday morning in the library. It was already a struggle for him to *not* punch them whenever they opened their mindless, cheerful mouths.

Instead, Harry made his way down to the kitchens, having found out its location previously from the Marauder's Map. The kitchens were overrun with hundreds of annoying little house elves, all wearing little tea towels with the Hogwarts crest draped round them like togas. The room itself was like a mirror of the Great Hall. The only real differences would be the pots and pans that adorned the walls and the brick fireplace at the far end. It had a similar high ceiling and four house tables, each waiting under their counterparts above to send food up. At the moment these were groaning under the weight of mounds upon mounds of food. Every so often, a piece of this food would disappear as someone above took it and placed it upon their own plate. Briefly, Harry entertained himself with the thoughts of someone reaching forwards for a roll only to have it disappear beneath their fingertips. Being unable to deny the urge to create such a scene above, he took a roll from the Slytherin table from the area he was sure Nymph would be sitting – she would be sitting at her own table, he was sure, without him there.

The elves barely even stopped to bow to him as they hurried about fetching food from one place to another. This was better than their usual overcrowding ways, which reminded him slightly of the Gryffindors above. They did not object to his taking food from the table so he assumed that he was allowed to – not that it would have made much difference to him - and took a piece of fruit as well and left the kitchen.

On his way back to the library, eating his apple as he went, it suddenly occurred to him to ask Sir about the creature residing in the Chamber of Secrets. It took a moment for Sir to answer, as if he had been busy doing something else or wasn't paying attention.

"If you cannot work it out for yourself, I am not about to tell you," was the answer when it came. *"What makes you think that I know what the beast is? You have grown very presumptuous, boy."*

“Well, I just thought that since you were so all knowing you might have an idea what it is,” he replied flippantly. He was a tad surprised when he did not get reprimanded for cheek. Sir really was distracted.

“All I will say on the matter, boy, is this; the creature would be something that only Salazar Slytherin and his descendents would be able to control.”

Sir fell silent and Harry was sure that he would not hear from him for the rest of the day. Normally he would have stopped and wondered what the voice was doing but his mind was too full of his words, which *had* to be a large hint somehow.

So what did it mean? There was any number of creatures that Slytherin could have bound to him and his family. Any animal could be made into a familiar in this way, surely. If Harry wanted to, he was certain there was a way that even a spider could be bound to serve him and only him. For some reason, he wasn't sure this was what Sir had meant. There had to be some other meaning to his words.

Maybe the question wasn't *how* the monster served Slytherin but *what* monster Slytherin would want to serve him. No doubt he would not want some cowardly rodent like a squirrel to act as his fearsome monster. No, Slytherin would want something that reflected his personality and was just as important as he would have thought himself.

Of course! How could he have not realised it before? The answer was so blatantly obvious that Harry was surprised that no one had worked it out. It also made him feel slightly annoyed with himself that he had wasted so much time researching things like the giant rat king and that odd sea dragon thing.

The monster that lay within the Chamber of Secrets was a snake.

It was so obvious! The Slytherin House was infamous for its snake mascot and the cunning and sly ways that snakes acted in. Slytherin was also infamous for its descendents all having the ability to speak parseltongue. Really the only thing that should have even *briefly* required research was the type of snake. It was most likely the biggest, most dangerous, snake there was.

Harry hurried the rest of the way back to the library. When he got there, he wasted no time at all in finding a book that had a list of snakes in order of their size and danger. Of course, then he had to consult another book for information on the snake.

Of the many fearsome beasts and monsters that roam our land, there is none more curious or deadly than the Basilisk, also known as the King of Serpents. This snake, which may reach gigantic size, and live many hundreds of years, is born from a chicken's egg, hatched beneath a toad. Its methods of killing are most wondrous, for aside from its deadly and venomous fangs, the basilisk has a murderous stare, and all who are fixed with the beam of its eye shall suffer instant death. Spiders flee before the Basilisk, for it is their mortal enemy, and the Basilisk flees only from the crowing of the rooster, which is fatal to it.

Harry couldn't repress a snort of laughter, despite the seriousness of the basilisk's danger. It was afraid of a rooster? The image of a huge snake slinking hurriedly out of sight before a tiny rooster at dawn was very amusing. Pushing the thought from his mind, he went in search of another book that could confirm his great suspicion that it was a basilisk residing within the Chamber of Secrets.

It did not take long to find such a book. Indeed, it was in a book that Harry was sure would be assigned to classes taking Care of Magical Creatures that he found an excerpt that clearly stated that the only one who could control a basilisk was a parselmouth.

The only thing that might mean that the creature was not a basilisk was the fact that Mrs Norris had been *petrified*, not killed. There hadn't been anything visibly wrong with her, other than her lack of movement, so Harry was willing to bet that she hadn't been pierced by a fang. How then? The cat would have had to been caught in the stare of the basilisk but that meant she'd have died anyway... wouldn't it? Maybe it was only humans that died. No, that didn't seem too likely; none of the books said anything about animals being able to survive its stare... Unless Mrs Norris hadn't looked at the snake directly. Yes, that might be it. Come to think of it, Harry remembered that there had been a large puddle of water in the corridor where she had been found. She might have just seen the reflection.

Harry was rather proud of his accomplishment and had already rushed along a couple of corridors to find someone to share it with when he realised he couldn't. He wasn't supposed to know anything about the Chamber of Secrets. Everyone had been making a point of not mentioning it to him, as if they were trying to forget about Jeremy. More than a little suspicion would arise if he suddenly knew everything that had happened before he arrived.

His next thought was to talk to Nymph about it but that idea was quickly shot down too. It would hardly appear as if he had been reformed from his "criminal ways" if he was still seen to be talking to Nymph and Malfoy, both of whom were hardly well renowned for their saintly deeds.

There was so much he couldn't do! Why couldn't he go up and talk to who he wanted about whatever he wanted? Why couldn't he mention a single *name* without choking on air? Why couldn't he even *leave* if he wanted to? Harry knew the answer.

Dumbledore.

In frustration he let out a strangled yell and punched a nearby suit of armour, which promptly collapsed to the ground with a clang. He ran a hand angrily through his hair. There were so many restrictions on him! He just wanted to be free. Free to do whatever he wanted. Free to talk to whomever he wanted. Free to make friends without having to fear for their lives. *Free.*

All of a sudden, Harry was feeling very claustrophobic and restrained. He took off at a run, heading for the grounds. He just wanted to get out into the open, no walls, no boundaries. He wanted to run and to keep running until he couldn't run any more. He couldn't, but he would do the next best thing.

Harry didn't stop once on his way down to the grounds. He simply ran past the random bystanders, not caring who they were or what they thought. He didn't stop when he passed Ron in the corridor. He didn't even stop when he met Nymph coming out of the Great Hall. He barely heard her try to speak to him when he passed.

“Harry, what are you –“ she cut off as he streaked passed her out of the great oak doors to the outside. “Harry!” she half shrieked, half shouted, after him as he continued to run across the grounds, not once slowing.

He was heading towards the forest. It was there that he felt most peaceful and it seemed to him that it had been an age since he had last been in it. There he would be undisturbed and was the least restricted. Everywhere else in the school that was his prison there were teachers and students, both of which had demands on him. He wasn't going to run away; he knew it would be futile to try. All Harry was going to do was escape for perhaps an hour or two, nothing more. Even from this distance, he could feel the trees beckoning. They were just as eager for him to escape into their shelter as he was.

Breathing was becoming difficult. That was a slight understatement; breathing was becoming very difficult for Harry. His breaths were coming in painful gasps but he did not slow. If it were up to them, his legs could keep going for some time yet but his lungs were telling a different story. The edges of his vision were beginning to cloud, as well, and he was feeling slightly light-headed. However, there was not much distance between him and the forest now so Harry kept going relentlessly.

Just before he finally reached the haven of the trees, he stopped. He didn't want to (as displayed by his efforts at fighting this intrusion to his running) but suddenly there were invisible hands holding firmly onto him, preventing him taking another step forwards. Harry, weak from his long sprint and gasping breaths, soon could not muster up the willpower to fight against the invisible hands. He sunk to the ground, still breathing heavily.

“You know I cannot permit you to enter the forest.”

Harry whipped his head around. There stood Dumbledore, as calm as ever, staring down at him thoughtfully. He felt the anger boil up within him. Here stood the man who had placed him in his binds having placed another upon him. He felt like a caged animal, feeling anger but incapable of acting on it. It took the thought of his eventual

revenge on Dumbledore to calm himself down slightly. For now, it was best if Harry appeared humble or some other such attitude.

"There is simply too great a risk that you will injure yourself or attempt to run away again," continued the old man, not even bothering to offer to help him up. "I was rather hoping that you wouldn't attempt to leave again but it seems I have hoped in vain."

"I wasn't running away!" Harry cried in outrage. What did Dumbledore think he was, a coward? If anything, the fool should have realised that he was not to be frightened into running from his problems.

"Indeed? You *were* running and in the direction furthest from the castle too."

"I wanted some fresh air and I thought the exercise would do me good," Harry answered stubbornly.

"And you thought you would take that exercise into the *Forbidden Forest*? I must say, I'd have thought you would be wary of the place by now."

Harry thought quickly. The only answer he could think of quickly to that was rather idiotic but he said it sweetly nonetheless. "The smell of trees calms me down."

Dumbledore raised an old eyebrow. "Duly noted." Now it was Harry's turn to be puzzled. The way Dumbledore had said that made it sound rather like he was planning on using this information to his advantage in the future. What did he intend to do? Harry wouldn't put it past him to conjure a pine air freshener next time he thought Harry was getting annoyed. "I hope you will, in future, refrain from seeking refuge in the forest again. You know how dangerous it is in there. I will bid you farewell, then."

The old man walked off in the direction of the castle. Staring after him, Harry clenched his fists in order to prevent himself from sending some nasty curses at the back of him. Dumbledore had *no* right to tell him what to do but he had to be patient. Suddenly, Harry knew exactly how he could get back at Dumbledore for expelling him

unjustly. It would need a bit of time to prepare but other than that, all he had to do was wait for the right time to act.

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All thoughts and plans of his upcoming... activities... were wiped clean out of Harry's head as he entered the Gryffindor common room, having meandered up there deep in thought. Clustered around the notice board was a small group of students all chattering excitedly. Ron was there and he beckoned Harry over eagerly. Begrudgingly, he walked over to him.

"They're starting a duelling club!" Ron exclaimed as soon as Harry was close enough to hear him over the babble of the common room. "First meeting's tonight! What d'you reckon? It could be fun..." He seemed very unsure whether he wanted to go or not. Harry could tell that he did but it was almost as if Ron didn't want to give a definite opinion until he, Harry, had given his own. How odd.

The idea itself wasn't too appealing to him but when he thought about it, Harry expected it would be interesting, at least, to see what standard others in Hogwarts were at with their duelling skills. Even if they weren't great, it would be a good opportunity to curse some of his peers into oblivion without fear of reprisal. It could probably help to relieve some of his anger, he thought bemusedly.

"Sure, why not," he agreed and that settled the matter. At eight o'clock that night he, along with many other students, made his way down to the Great Hall. The tables had vanished and a golden stage had appeared along one wall, lit by thousands of candles floating overhead. The ceiling was velvety black and most of the school seemed to be packed beneath it, all carrying their wands and looking excited. He had managed to send Ron and several others on ahead without him so Harry was able to enter alone and stand near the back of the crowd where few would notice him. He was just wondering who would be taking the club when he was interested by a very familiar voice.

"You took your time coming to Hogwarts, Potter," drawled Malfoy, suddenly appearing at his elbow, unnoticed by the rest of the hall. He must have ditched Crabbe and Goyle somewhere in the crowd. Harry

knew he was referring to the time he was absent as both Jeremy and Harry.

After glancing around to make sure no one was watching to see him talking to Malfoy, Harry answered casually, "I was... detained by the headmaster so I could be "trained" so I was at your level."

"I must say, I was surprised, what with your interesting personality, that you were sorted into Gryffindor rather than Slytherin."

"So was I." Harry lowered his voice to a whisper so that Malfoy had to lean towards him to hear him over the din of the hall. "Look, I got an appearance to keep up for a while so just act like we're rivals or something. I want Dumbledore to think I'm different now, right? I'll explain why when I've done what I have to do."

Malfoy looked at him for a moment through narrowed eyes. "You better have something planned, Potter. I am not accustomed to doing things for others; you owe me one." With that he walked away to the front of the crowd where Harry could just make out Crabbe, Goyle and, surprisingly, Nymph. He couldn't help but think that Malfoy was slightly irritated with him, though he couldn't begin to wonder why.

At that moment, Lockhart walked out onto the stage, wearing robes of deep plum, and accompanied by Snape, wearing his usual black. Harry was torn between groaning and laughing. On the one hand, perhaps his two least favourite teachers were taking the duelling club but on the other, it definitely would make for an interesting experience.

Lockhart waved his arms for silence and when at last it had befallen the hall, began a short introduction to the club which was more than a little boastful on his part and more than a little degrading on Snape's. By the end of it, Snape was *not* looking happy; he was wearing that special glower he usually reserved for him, Harry. Finally, they began their demonstration.

"One – two – three – "

Both of them swung their wands up and over their shoulders. Snape cried, "*Expelliarmus!*" and there was a flash of dazzling scarlet light

and Lockhart was blasted off his feet. He flew backwards, off the stage, smashed into the wall and slid down it to sprawl on the floor.

Quickly, Lockhart was back on his feet (but not after Harry had let out a great snort of laughter) and was trying to cover up for his embarrassment. Seeing the even more murderous look Snape was giving him for this, the defence professor announced that he and Snape were going to go round and pair students up to practise the disarming charm, something that Harry had long ago mastered wandlessly and without sound. Unfortunately, Snape got to him first to pair him up.

“Well, well, well,” said Snape silkily. “If it isn’t Mister Potter. Hiding in the back hoping to avoid being paired up? I can’t say I’m surprised; you are certain to do abysmally. How you got into Gryffindor, I’ll never know. Why, you’ve not an ounce of bravery to –”

“At least I’m not terrified that the shower will eat me if I wash my hair,” Harry replied automatically. “It looks like you’ve been harbouring that fear for quite some time. Tell me, is it hard to –”

“Malfoy!” barked Snape, effectively cutting him off. Malfoy looked up and came over at Snape’s beckon. “Partner with Potter, here. No need to hold back, I’m sure the world’s saviour will be able to cope.”

“But Professor,” said Malfoy, startled at Snape’s open fury. “I’ve already been partnered with –”

“You will partner with Potter.” Snape swept away, robes billowing out behind him, but not before calling over his shoulder, “Thirty points for cheek, Potter.”

At Lockhart’s word, Harry inclined his head ever so slightly toward Malfoy and the blonde mimicked his gesture. Malfoy obviously remembered tales of what Harry had done to the Weasley twins but for his part, he had only paled slightly, not that his normally white skin would allow for much.

“Wands at the ready! shouted Lockhart. “When I count to three, cast your charms to disarm your opponent – *only* to disarm them – we don’t want any accidents. One... Two... Three...”

Malfoy, however, did not bother waiting for three and cast his spell on two. Anticipating an attack such as this, Harry merely waved his gloved hand, with his wand held loosely, and deflected the spell. It bounced across the hall and hit an unfortunate Ravenclaw girl, not that Harry noticed. It was easier to deflect a spell than to create a shield, he had discovered during his lessons with Sir. He didn't actually have to cast any spell to do so.

"Do not attack the boy," said Sir, startling Harry momentarily. *"Use this as an exercise on defence; you don't get nearly enough practise."*

Nodding, even though it would look odd to Malfoy, Harry waited for his opponent to cast his next spell. He did not have to wait long and soon Malfoy was sending a steady stream of spells that he deflected, blocked, dodged or sent back at the caster with ease, never once having to say a word.

As Malfoy doubled over, his legs dancing from his own spell, Harry noticed that Lockhart was trying in vain to stop the battling crowd. Snape took charge and cancelled the spells across the hall with one simple incantation. Harry sent one last amused look at his partner before directing his attention to the front of the room.

"I think I'd better teach you how to *block* unfriendly spells," said Lockhart, standing flustered in the midst of the hall. He glanced at Snape, whose black eyes glinted, and looked away quickly. "Let's have a volunteer pair – Longbottom and Finch-Fletchley, how about you?"

"A bad idea, Professor Lockhart," said Snape, gliding over like a large and malevolent bat, as he always did. "Longbottom causes devastation with the simplest spells. We'll be sending what's left of Finch-Fletchley up to the hospital wing in a matchbox." Privately Harry had to agree with him but he wasn't about to voice his opinion. "How about Malfoy and Potter?" said Snape with a twisted smile.

Harry rolled his eyes. How typical that Snape would pick on them. What Snape seemed to have forgotten, however, was the fact that Harry was perfectly capable of defending himself. If Snape was looking for him to fail miserably he was going to be sorely

disappointed. The crowd backed away to give them room in the centre of the hall.

Lockhart attempted to do something that Harry wasn't even sure would lead to *any* spell that would *ever* be created and ended up dropping his wand. As Snape moved closer to whisper something in Malfoy's ear (who had gone even paler, somehow), he sent Lockhart a scathing look.

Lockhart clapped Harry merrily on the shoulder but stopped his hand from doing so again at the glare he received. "Just do what I did, Harry!"

"I'm sure dropping my wand will be *very* beneficial," he drawled in response.

Unfortunately, Lockhart didn't hear and merely counted in Malfoy's attack.

"*Serpensortia!*" bellowed Malfoy, after raising his wand quickly.

The end of his wand exploded. Harry watched and couldn't help but burst out laughing as a long black snake shot out of it, fell heavily onto the floor between them and raised itself, ready to strike. He laughed harder as the crowd screamed and scampered backwards. The two professors did nothing but stare at him, open mouthed.

"*Stop,*" Harry hissed at the snake, controlling his laughter. "*You obey me now, not the blonde one.*" The snake obeyed immediately. "*Come to me little snake.*"

The snake slithered obediently over to him and up his arm when instructed. Harry let out one last chortle before striding calmly out of the hall, paying no attention as students scrambled backwards to make a path for him.

Harry hadn't gone far from the Great Hall before someone came running out after him, effectively causing him to turn stop and turn to face the newcomer. It was Malfoy – no real surprise then. When in doubt, assume that Malfoy's the cause.

"*That*," exclaimed Malfoy, grinning widely. "Was brilliant! I don't think I've seen the Gryffindors that scared since you maimed the Weasley twins!"

Harry just looked at him for a moment. Yes, Malfoy was, in fact, crazy. "Did you plan on that happening or were you just going out on a limb?"

"Don't be thick," Malfoy replied. "If I wanted to expose you as Jeremy White there are far better ways to do it, like pointing out your very... *stylish* gloves. No, Professor Snape told me to conjure a snake. I think he thought it would scare you..."

"Snape," Harry growled in frustration. It always led back to Snape or Dumbledore. He wasn't really sure why Snape had done it though; surely the professor would have remembered that he was a parselmouth. Unless it had been *Snape's* intention to expose him. It didn't make any sense. If Snape wanted everyone to know about Harry then he would have known better ways to go about it as well. How odd.

"What do you two have against each other anyway?" asked Malfoy, bringing Harry out of his reverie. "He's the best professor in this place."

Glancing around to see if anyone else had exited the Great Hall yet, he paused before answering. He didn't really want to tell Malfoy about Mir; Mir was his friend and he was gone now – there was no need to dredge up the past for Malfoy. "Let's just say," Harry answered eventually. "Me and my friend, we, well, we had a run in with Snape before first year."

“*Friend?*” asked Malfoy incredulously. Harry felt a bristle of annoyance pass through him. There was no need to say it like *that*, as if the idea of him having friends was so ludicrous. “What friend did you have before Hogwarts?”

“Contrary to popular belief, *Malfoy*,” Harry could not help but snarl. “I was not *dead* before I came to Hogwarts.”

“Yeah, Malfoy,” added Ron. Harry jumped slightly; he hadn’t heard the red head approach. “Get lost.”

Quickly Harry changed his expression into a glower at Malfoy. Then, when he was quite sure Ron wasn’t looking, he softened his expression and mouthed *later* at him.

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It turned out that very few people actually minded that Harry had the “dark” ability to speak parseltongue, something he was more than a little annoyed at. Initially when he had entered a crowded room next, there were murmurs and fearful whispers but by the time he left it again, no one was paying him any attention. Apparently it was alright for Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived and saviour of the wizarding world, to have dark abilities because he was famous and had defeated the Dark Lord. Jeremy White, scourge of Hogwarts, however, was *not* allowed to speak parseltongue. No one made the connection between them, however. No one even associated him with the Chamber of Secrets, though Ron laughingly told him later that if he had arrived just a month or two earlier with the ability, then everyone would be scurrying away from him like spiders from a cat. Apparently fame could get you everything.

The wizarding world wasn’t shallow at all, Harry thought sardonically.

Harry ended up keeping the snake that Malfoy had conjured. His original intent was to leave it in the forest where no one hurt it but he quickly remembered that he couldn’t approach it for Dumbledore’s spell. He then thought about banishing it but he’d already had a number of conversations with it by this point and he was reluctant to get rid of it. So, in the end, he kept it and named it Satheldin. Since then, it kept turning up in unexpected places, like Ron’s shoe.

Other than that, things ran smoothly and there were no unusual incidents or unlawful acts on Harry's part... for a few days.

It had been a particularly dull transfiguration class. They had been learning to transfigure a marble into a quill, something Harry had managed to do efficiently months ago. Consequently, he had gotten rather bored and had spent the remainder of the lesson changing other student's marbles into various objects without their realising. Most of them thought they had suddenly gotten considerably worse at transfiguration. Unfortunately, McGonagall had noticed and called Harry back at the end of the class to lecture him. It was a struggle, but he managed to withstand the lecture without making any snide comments or casting any hexes. He was positive McGonagall thought he had finally reformed.

Of course, this made him slightly late for his next class, Charms, and he had just hurried out the door when suddenly he wasn't just outside the door anymore. Harry tripped over something large lying on the ground. He turned, intending to give it a good kick, and let out a gasp.

It was Justin Finch-Fletchly, a Hufflepuff boy, quite petrified, and beside him was Nearly Headless Nick, the Gryffindor ghost, also petrified. Harry scrambled to his feet. He wasn't sure how he had gotten there or how much time had passed but he knew that he was only a few corridors from the Transfiguration classroom and he definitely *didn't* want to be found there.

"Why if it isn't wee Potter!" cackled a voice from behind him. Quickly, he spun around, ready to stun whoever it was but he faltered.

"Peeves!"

"What are you doing out here, ickle Potty? Class doesn't end for ten minutes – you could get in – oooh!"

"Peeves, *please*, don't –"

"ATTACK! THERE'S BEEN ANOTHER ATTACK! NO MORTAL OR GHOST IS SAFE! RUN FOR YOUR LIVES! ATTACK!"

Harry groaned and slumped against the wall as students came flooding out from classrooms all along the corridor. Whether he had done it or not, whether he was subconsciously attacking students or whether he was innocent, this was definitely *not* what he needed. Surely enough, as soon as the initial panic had slightly calmed down and the teachers had fought their way to the front of the crowd, all the attention turned to Harry.

“Potter,” gasped McGonagall. The crowd fell to nearly a complete silence. “What have you *done*?”

He glared at her. Sure, it certainly *looked* like he had set a basilisk on a ghost and a student (not that she would know it was a basilisk) but she didn’t *have* to assume the worst in him. “Now, why would you just assume it was me? Why not assume a *Slytherin* was Slytherin’s heir?”

“Because you never showed up to class,” squeaked Flitwick, interrupting McGonagall before she had fully opened her mouth. “And you are known throughout the school for having Slytherin’s gift, the ability to speak parseltongue.”

“But unlike my fellow students, Professor,” answered Harry softly. “I wasn’t here when the first attacks occurred, was I?” He knew that Flitwick did not know about his alternate identity.

“That’s it, Potter,” snapped McGonagall. Her lips were so thin pressed they were almost non-existent, which was an unusual look to say the least. “Dumbledore’s office. Professor Flitwick can you...” She gestured feebly towards the two immobile persons and turned to march Harry off to Dumbledore’s office... *again*.

“Is this really necessary? I’m sure he’s getting sick of seeing me there.” McGonagall did not answer but placed her hand upon Harry’s shoulder to guide him, as if he was going to run off at the first available opportunity.

On his way, he spotted Nymph looking at him curiously. He rolled his eyes at her and raised his eye-brows towards McGonagall. Clearly she understood as she smiled slightly and shook her head exasperatedly. Suddenly, her small smile turned into a feral grin for

an instant before disappearing altogether. She stepped forwards to intercept McGonagall.

“Hi there, Professor! Say, what’s you doing with Harry there?” Harry resisted the urge to laugh.

“I believe *that*, Miss Lestrangle,” said McGonagall primly and attempting to march Harry round Nymph. “Is none of your business.”

“But Professor!” protested Nymph, stepping to block their path again. “I was friends with that there ghost – I wants to know what’s going to happen to the culprit!”

“Oh *really*,” snapped Harry’s captor. Apparently her patience was wearing thin. “And what was the name of the ghost that has been petrified?”

“Erm,” said Nymph thoughtfully before continuingly quickly, with what was obviously the first thing that came into her head. “Heady. That was his there name.”

“My point exactly. Now would you kindly *move* so that I can pass.”

“Oh, but I wanted to ask you about that transfiguration essay you set, see,” replied Nymph cheerfully, stepping yet again to prevent them passing.

“Now is *not* the time, Miss Lestrangle.” And to Harry’s surprise – and Nymph’s – McGonagall used her remaining free hand to lift Nymph up off the floor by around an inch and *move* her so that she was standing against the wall, well out of their way. McGonagall continued to march Harry on even as the Slytherin first year behind them started to shout after them.

“Hey! Don’t you be thinking you can just *pick me up* and *move* me! I could have you done for abuse! Hey, wait a minute! I think I *will*. Yeah, that’s what I’ll be doing! I’m gonna go to the fuzz about this! I –” but the rest of whatever Nymph was going to do wasn’t heard by Harry as they rounded a corner, effectively moving out of earshot.

The rest of the walk to Dumbledore's office passed without incident, unless you counted the numerous stares that followed them as they passed. Then again, Harry was sure that if this was the first time he had been sent to Dumbledore's office he would find it far more entertaining as he would be worrying over the meeting's occurrence. It wasn't his first time being sent there, however, and so he was quite bored walking silently there with McGonagall. When they arrived, it was empty and surprisingly McGonagall left him alone so she could fetch the decrepit headmaster. Personally, Harry thought it was quite brave of her. If he had been in her position, he'd probably be worried that he would set fire to the office.

His eyes wandered the office, looking for something to entertain him until Dumbledore arrived. Almost immediately, the Sorting Hat came into view. He smiled grimly, reached up and placed the hat upon his head.

"You didn't get expelled *again* did you?" asked the hat, panicked.

"No!" exclaimed Harry mentally, quite offended at the insinuation. "Well, not yet, anyway –"

"Thank goodness!"

"- but I have a bone to pick with you."

"Oh *really*? And what might that be?" Harry wasn't sure but the hat either sounded ecstatic at having someone to talk to or very intrigued.

"Yeah, I do. What'd you put me in Gryffindor for? You must've known I'd be pretty miserable with all those Dumbledore lovers."

"*I say,*" burst in Sir. "*What are we doing back under this retched thing? You didn't get expelled again, did you?*"

"Shut up!" growled Harry, annoyed at both the assumptions and the interruption.

"*Oh, I see,*" said Sir after a moment. It was as if he hadn't been paying the slightest bit of attention and had just realised where they

were. *"He has a point, hat. I should know his mind by now and it's more Slytherin than anything else."*

"Hey, I didn't *want* to!" said the hat defensively.

No one said anything for a moment. Harry blinked in surprise, which was rather useless as his eyes were still covered by the overlarge hat.

"You what? How could you have *not* wanted to? You're the one that decides!"

"That is normally how it goes, yes, and I was *about* to make a decision when I was *compelled* to put you in Gryffindor."

"Compelled?" asked both Sir and Harry at the same time. If it had been possible, they would have looked at each other in surprise.

"Yes, by a spell, I'm sure." The hat sounded very thoughtful. "I'm not sure which or by who but rest assured, that decision was not unaided."

"You know, you're not very good at the whole sorting thing if you can be influenced by a single spell. I have half a mind to alter you myself with a little cutting spell I know."

"And I have half a mind to tell Dumbledore about you," retorted the hat. "Besides, it was a *strong* spell."

"But you won't?" asked Harry. Sir and the hat didn't seem to get along very well. "Tell Dumbledore that is."

"No," consented the hat. "Because I like you. You're fast becoming my favourite pupil. No one else comes to talk to me, never mind get sorted *twice*."

Harry laughed. Hats were weird. "I'd actually better get going; Dumbledore's going to be along soon."

"Oh, okay," replied the hat, somewhat disappointedly. Then it perked up again. "Come talk to me again sometime."

“Don’t worry,” Harry assured it. “I get sent here a lot.” Then he took off the hat to puzzle over what could possibly have gone wrong in his sorting *this* time.

He didn’t get far and had just thought of the possibility that Dumbledore might have tampered with the hat in the hopes of making Harry see the “light” when he was suddenly drawn out of his thoughts by a strange glowing light. There was a bird, perched in the corner of the room, and it was on *fire*! He just stood there, frozen in shock, as the bird burnt to ashes. Even if Dumbledore wasn’t annoyed about the petrified student and ghost, he was bound to be angry that Harry had burnt his pet bird to a crisp. He wasn’t even sure how he had done it but then again, he wasn’t sure how he did a lot of things. And of course, while Harry stood there shocked, Dumbledore chose that moment to enter the office.

“I swear I didn’t do it!” Harry cried immediately.

“Harry, Harry, Harry,” sighed Dumbledore. “Regardless of whether or not you have petrified a –“

“No, not that,” he corrected the old fool before he could continue any further. “I meant your bird. I *swear* I didn’t set it on fire! It burst into flames on its own.” He paused, then quickly added, “But I didn’t petrify anyone either.”

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows in surprise before turning round to see the pile of ash and then, for some senile reason, Harry was sure, he smiled. “Ah, not to worry, Harry. Fawkes is a phoenix –“

“Oh, thank god!” Harry breathed, cutting Dumbledore off. He knew all about phoenixes; he had read up on them a while ago for Sir.

“Indeed,” said Dumbledore. “Now, back to the matter at hand.” He took a seat behind his desk, looking as infuriatingly calm and old as ever. “The petrification of Mister Finch-Fletchly and Sir Nick.”

“I didn’t do it,” persisted Harry, not even glancing at the seat opposite Dumbledore. He would be damned if he was going to sit just to be *polite*.

“So you have said. Is there anything you’d like to tell me?” he asked gently, taking Harry by surprise. “Anything at all?”

He frowned, utterly confused. What was Dumbledore blathering about *now*? What did he expect Harry to say? Yes, there were many things he’d like to share? There was certainly a number of things he *could* share. The monster in the Chamber of Secrets was a basilisk and he could hear it when it moved through the school. He also heard a voice that frequently talked to him in his head and had, on two different occasions, taken control of his body. That same voice instructed him in magic as well and hated Dumbledore. There was also Jacques, the mysterious centaur that no one but he could see. Then there was the fact that both times someone had been petrified by the basilisk he couldn’t remember where he had been, though he was sure he hadn’t ordered the basilisk to do it. He had also helped the disembodied spirit to steal the Philosopher’s Stone, though he had been unsuccessful. And, of course, there was the fact that he suspected Dumbledore had somehow made the hat put him in Gryffindor. Oh, not to forget the fact that he *hadn’t* been kidnapped over the summer and had just gone with his *friend* Nymph. *And* he had a wooden arm. Yes, there really was a large number of things he *could* tell Dumbledore.

“Nope,” he answered brightly. “Nothing at all.”

“Very well,” sighed the headmaster. “I think you should join the Gryffindor Quidditch team.”

“*What?*”

“Not as a punishment, of course,” he continued, as if he heard no interruption. “They would be happy to have you on the team as their seeker and I think it would be an ideal opportunity for you to get to know some of your housemates a bit better. You haven’t made very many friends and now that some of them might suspect you as the Heir of Slytherin, I think it will be difficult for you to. So, I think you should join the team.”

“But I don’t *want* to,” retorted Harry, more than a little petulantly.

“In which case,” said Dumbledore, his tone suddenly much sterner. “Consider it a punishment for skipping class and potentially petrifying another student and a ghost. I order you to join the Gryffindor Quidditch team.” When Harry said nothing, he added. “You are dismissed.”

Just as he was closing the door behind him, Harry heard Dumbledore sigh and mutter to himself in a much more weary tone.

“What am I going to do with you Harry?”

The next morning at breakfast, Harry, having been in the Great Hall for some time reading a charms book, was startled out of his daydream that he had inadvertently fallen into when excited chatter filled the hall. Alarmed, he started gazing round the hall for the source of the commotion. It was quickly spotted. The daily owls carrying post had come flooding into the hall but that wasn't what was causing the commotion. No, what was creating the murmurs was what three particular owls were carrying. Instead of each carrying an envelope or small package, as the students were well accustomed to seeing, the three owls were carrying a long cylindrical object wrapped in brown paper between them. Needless to say, nearly every student in the hall (and a few teachers) was watching the owls' circle of the Great Hall with enthusiasm, each wondering who the recipient would be.

Harry refrained from groaning. Of course it *would* have to be *him*, wouldn't it? He untied the package from the owls' legs, allowing them to fly away again, but made no move to unwrap the long package. If it was making the other students stare this much at just the paper he was unwilling to cause them further enjoyment by actually showing them the content. Besides that, *he* didn't care what was in it. He definitely wasn't expecting any mail; he never was. He glanced at the eager faces surrounding him.

"Well! Open it already!" urged Ron from across the table. Inwardly, Harry thought the package would be a very feeble object to hit over Ron's head.

"What is it?" asked Neville, sitting slightly further down the table.

Harry looked at all the faces of the crowd that was watching him and smirked. "I could do you all a great service and open it in front of you all so that your curiosity would be satisfied-" There were vigorous nods of enthusiasm here. "But I don't think I will. You'll just have to wait and see." And then, to the disappointment of perhaps all in the hall bar one, Harry walked calmly out of the room, both the package and the letter attached to it unopened.

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The rest of the day passed fairly calmly, depending or not on whether constant nagging and inquiries as to the package at breakfast was calmly. By the end of the day, Harry was lucky not to have cursed any of his inquisitors. He had been sorely tempted to. More than tempted, in fact. At one point just before transfiguration he had grown so frustrated that he had pulled out his wand and opened his mouth to cast the incantation when McGonagall had come out of the class and started reprimanding him for doing magic in the corridors. Overall, it was not his best day at Hogwarts. His only regret was not being able to complete the spell.

It was very surprising that none of the students, except those who knew, of course, thought he was the least bit averted to being Dumbledore's favourite pupil and boy wonder of the wizarding world. Harry would have thought that someone would have cottoned on to the fact.

So it was an already more than a little irritated Harry that was sitting eating his dinner when he was interrupted by the great shadow that fell over his plate. He turned, fully prepared to blast the perpetrator. Before he could get his mouth open to utter the words, however, the boy spoke.

"McGonagall tells me you're interested in becoming the Gryffindor seeker," gushed the boy. "I'm Oliver Wood, captain of the team. McGonagall said that you got a broom this morning too so I thought now would be a good time to see what you can do. I'll see you on the pitch in ten minutes then once you've collected your broom?" he asked, mistaking Harry's furious glare for a sign of assent. The boy then bounded away again, rather like an excited rabbit.

Still, glowering, Harry got up and left to head up to Gryffindor tower to retrieve the package that he had received that morning, assuming correctly that it must be a broom. His anger peaked as he felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickle. He glanced back towards the staff table and saw both McGonagall and Dumbledore looking cheerfully down at him. Letting loose a long stream of curses under his breath, he continued his march out of the hall. He couldn't curse them just yet. No, he had a far better punishment planned for them and they wouldn't even know he had done it. After all, he was doing a

spectacular job of appearing to be reformed. At least, in his opinion he was. Soon he would get at least a little revenge. Soon.

The package was, in fact, a broomstick. Even without having a great knowledge on the subject, Harry could tell that it was a good broom. It was sleek, had perfectly trimmed twigs and even looked like the wood was carved so that it was aerodynamically superior. It was a pretty piece of wood, he decided begrudgingly, picking it up and leaving in the direction of the Quidditch pitch, but no more than that. On the handle of the broom, in bright gold letters, were the words Nimbus 2000.

Wood was there already when Harry got on the pitch and upon his arrival, the older boy immediately started gawking at his broom, evidently slightly jealous. “A Nimbus 2000! Wow! That’s got to be one of the best brooms on the market! I heard it can reach up to –“

“Can we just get on with it?” cut in Harry, rather rudely. He really didn’t care for the specifics on his broom. He was sure it was all well and good but considering he didn’t actually want to ride the thing it was all rather irrelevant. There were snakes writhing around in his stomach already. Even the thought of reaching such great heights was enough to catch his breath.

“Course!” replied Wood, not in the least put off by Harry’s brusque tone. “Right, mount your broom then and just fly around the pitch a couple of times so I see what your flying’s like.”

Harry frowned at the chunk of wood in his hand. Why did the blasted thing have to fly? It would have made a very nice sweeping broom. However, he obediently mounted the broom and then, before he could think about it any further, he kicked off, soaring immediately towards the sky.

Once he had reached the height of the goal hoops, he couldn’t help but glance at the ground some fifty metres below, blatantly ignoring all advice he had heard when he was younger about *not* looking down when you were high up. Surprisingly, the snakes stopped writhing and he felt no fear at all. It really wasn’t that bad. He felt totally secure sitting on his broom, like it was natural for him to do so. His fear of heights seemed to have vanished completely.

No, not completely. Harry's mind had cast back slightly to the time he had fallen off the sky scraper building and he shuddered. Perhaps it wasn't the height he was afraid of; he was certainly high now – and still rising – but he felt no fear. Maybe it was only falling that terrified him. Yes, that seemed plausible. He wasn't scared of falling off his broom, he was scared of that actual falling feeling, knowing the ground was rushing towards him, meaning imminent death, but being unable to do something about it. That feeling of... lack of control. Harry smiled. That was definitely it; he was positive. He liked to be in control of his life.

Feeling much more confident and completely forgetting about Wood, he turned his broom sharply upwards so that he shot up into the sky like a bullet. After almost doubling his height, he turned it and shot straight down, in a perfect vertical dive. He wasn't afraid of this, not anymore. He was in control. The broom went faster and faster and Harry let it, even urged it on. After falling for several moments, as the ground loomed dangerously close, he pulled the front of the broom up, knowing exactly how it would turn and that it would miss the ground by just a few feet. Surely enough, it did.

From somewhere below (Harry had risen in height again), Wood called something about releasing the snitch. Or it might have been that he was releasing a bludger. It was some ball or other; Harry hadn't really been paying attention but he didn't really care either. He could deal with whatever it was if he wanted. It was up to him.

Apparently it was *not* the bludger that had been released, unless it had suddenly morphed itself into a tiny golden snitch. Harry had caught a glint of gold out of the corner of his eye and, following the glint to its source, had spotted the tiny ball. He grinned and gave chase, amusing himself by mimicking the ball's path. It weaved its way through the air in a peculiar manner, apparently not satisfied with going in straight lines or following the most sensible, logical path. It was not long before he had caught the tiny thing. Harry was just wondering what he was supposed to do with the thing when Wood called again from the ground, reminding Harry that he was there at all. He was sorely tempted to remain flying but begrudgingly he landed beside the captain.

“That was fantastic!” exclaimed Wood immediately. “I’ve not seen anyone fly that well in years! You’re a natural! I’ve not seen anyone fly that well since... well, that’s not important.” Harry was convinced Wood was about to say “White” but said nothing. “You’re definitely on the team, no doubt about that. With you on the team we’re bound to win the cup this year! Gryffindor haven’t won in years but that’ll change now; I’ll make sure of it.”

Wood spent another five minutes rambling about various aspects of Quidditch and how great the team was going to be. Harry was beginning to wonder if the older boy would actually notice that not only was he not paying attention, he didn’t care in the slightest. His dismounting from the broom and brought reality rushing suddenly back to him. Here on the ground he wasn’t in control and as long as people like Dumbledore were around, he wouldn’t be able to live the life he wanted. He wasn’t really in control when flying either; he didn’t have a choice whether he did or not. Dumbledore had ordered that he join the team and there he was, joining the team. Well, Dumbledore would see soon enough how much control he, Harry, actually had over what went on around Hogwarts. Out of the blue another thought hit him. Why wait? His preparations could be finished in a night. He grinned. Tomorrow. Tomorrow he would have his revenge.

“So you got that? Practises are three times a week and our first match is on a week on Saturday, so you’ll have to practise hard,” Wood was saying, still oblivious to the inner thoughts of Harry. “Shouldn’t be too hard, though. You’re one hell of an improvement on our last seeker. She couldn’t catch the snitch if it flew up her sleeve.”

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Lunch was an interesting affair, Harry decided the next day. All around him students were happily tucking into the many delicacies. Harry himself wasn’t eating much but for once it wasn’t because of his small appetite. He was just too excited. It wouldn’t be too long now.

Someone screamed.

A third year girl at the Ravenclaw table had leapt to her feet and was staring wildly around the room. “Look!” she shrieked, batting at the air.

“Get them away! No! Make them stop! Professor, the snakes! There’s one behind you!” She screamed again.

Dumbledore looked at her in alarm. “Miss Fawcett, I assure you there is nothing there nor here at Hogwarts that will harm you –”

A Hufflepuff boy yelled. “They’re everywhere! No, duck!”

All around the Great Hall, the panic was spreading like wildfire as other students leapt to their feet and started yelling about snakes that were surrounding them. The students who saw nothing were becoming more and more paranoid and some were even screaming in terror themselves at invisible assailants. Harry was becoming *very* amused himself but he masked it well.

The doors to the hall burst open and a group of other similarly terrified pupils came charging in, also shouting in terror, and somehow made themselves heard over the crazed crowd. “Professor Dumbledore! The suits of armour! They’ve come alive and they’ve gone crazy! Please, sir, come quick! They’re capturing students!”

Some students, who had been running madly towards the exit, turned and started running back into the hall. Many weren’t even looking where they were going and ran into each other. Others were shooting spells at snakes that only half the student body could see. These spells hit nothing but other students, which did not help the mayhem that had begun. The teachers were trying in vain to calm the pupils down but not one listened. Professor Flitwick was even casting spells at the snakes too. There was not a single person left in their seat. Most were trying to flood towards the doors but there was an equally strong flood running in to escape whatever horrors there were outside. It had successfully created one giant crush.

It wasn’t over.

Some of the students had been clambering over the tops of tables in order to escape both the mysterious horrors and their fellow pupils. One such pupil gave an almighty shriek that somehow rose above all the others. It was this, not Dumbledore’s booming thunderclaps, that drew the attention of the pupils. The girl who had shrieked went rigid and abruptly collapsed onto the table, quite clearly petrified.

The panic that had frozen for a moment, returned tenfold. In amongst the many shouts, screams, yells and shrieks, several words could be heard over and over again.

“It’s the heir of Slytherin! He’s returned! He’s wiping us out! Run for your lives!”

The rest of the day passed in a blur for Harry, and many of the other students, and much of the night too. The panic continued well into the wee hours of the morning. Witches and wizards lived out the day in constant fear. Many of the pupils were hit by various spells that had missed their invisible targets. Others were petrified like the first girl. It wasn’t uncommon to find students huddling in corners to escape snakes and there were many times that Harry walked through a hallway only to find someone struggling in vain against a suit of armour. On occasion, there was even a pupil or two caught with real snakes wrapped round them like binds.

Hogwarts castle seemed to have come alive. The staircases changed every time someone stepped upon them and the doors often closed and locked themselves before desperate pupils. Random objects would lift themselves up and prod unsuspecting students with increasing enthusiasm until finally the witch or wizard could outrun them. It took Dumbledore and the rest of the faculty over fourteen hours to finally sort out the mayhem and make sure uninjured pupils were in their common rooms. And that wasn’t even the icing on the cake.

At the end of the third floor corridor that had been banned the previous year to all pupils who had not wished to die “a painful death” there was a message, written in the same red paint that had been beside Mrs Norris.

“THE HEIR OF SLYTHERIN WILL NEVER BE TRULY GONE.
ONLY THE HEIR CONTROLS ITS FATE.”

Harry had rather liked that. It had that type of... ominous feeling to it. Overall, he was very pleased with how his day had gone, even if it was a little tiring. It had been difficult to pull off all the different effects that he had but he wouldn’t have had it any other way.

The original fear in the Great Hall had been extremely easy to create. He had snuck down to the kitchens, under a charm to prevent the elves from noticing him, and simply mixed several potions in with the food that had already been being prepared for lunch. One of the potions had been a specified hallucination potion which would cause its victims to think they were being surrounded by millions of snakes, all hissing deadly. The other potion he had included was a potion that would petrify any pupil who took it. Unfortunately, this potion would not have quite the same effect as the basilisks interrupted sight would; instead of requiring an antidote including mandrake, the potion simply wore off after twenty-four hours. Of course, Dumbledore was not to know this until its effects had disappeared.

The suits of armours, switching staircases and locking doors had all been created with a few complex charms. Harry had spent his night going round the castle putting complicated animation charms on the various objects and then putting delaying charms on them so that they would not take effect until the upcoming lunch. The snakes that had bound a few privileged pupils had been real, however, conjured and ordered to hide until the moment was right.

Finally, Harry had painted his message on the wall and put a timed concealment charm on that too along with several preservation charms and permanent sticking charms. This he felt was more personal; it showed, perhaps not so subtly, his feelings of the previous day. That, and it was ambiguous enough that it could apply to the actual heir as well as Harry. He was certain that Dumbledore would take it to mean its correct definition so all he had to do was persuade the headmaster that it wasn't him. Simple.

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The next day found Harry once again sitting in Dumbledore's office awaiting his appearance. Classes had been cancelled in order to give the staff time to repair some of the damage that had been done to the school by either Harry's spells or students trying to defend themselves. At breakfast, which was held later than usual in order to give pupils and staff a bit more time to catch up on their lost sleep, Dumbledore had announced that the heir of Slytherin *had* been expelled and these were merely pranks attempt to replicate the heir's

style and to cause panic. Personally, Harry thought he had done a very successful job of it.

At lunch, Dumbledore had looked slightly less old and stood again to make a cheerful announcement. He informed the rest of the school that the seventeen pupils that had been petrified had awoken by themselves. Unfortunately, he also told them, Justin Finch-Fletchly, Nearly Headless Nick and Mrs Norris were still in their petrified state. It had been shortly after this that Harry had left the Great Hall and immediately been intercepted by McGonagall with another summons to the headmasters office.

So there he was yet *again*. Fawkes the phoenix was looking in much better health but it was not the bird that caught his attention. He supposed Dumbledore would be between five and ten minutes more before arriving so he had plenty of time. Really he was very trusting of Harry; the headmaster didn't seem to fear at all the possibility of Harry destroying his office. Similar to the last time he had been in the office, his attention was drawn to the Sorting Hat and he didn't waste much time before putting it upon his head.

"Hey there hatty," he said cheerfully.

"Why hello again! I say, you *do* get sent here rather often don't you?"

"That's what I thought too... Anyway, listen. Do you have any idea who put the compulsion spell on you to place me in Gryffindor? Was it Dumbledore?"

"I honestly have no idea. You forget, Harry, I am just a hat. I don't have the ability to detect and trace magical signatures. Even if I did, there would be a chance that the perpetrator would take care to disguise themselves. I'm sorry but I can't help you there. So what are you in for this time?" the hat paused but did not wait for Harry to answer. "You faked being the heir of Slytherin? I say, that *is* a new one."

He paused for a moment, weighing his next thoughts. At length, he decided he could trust the hat. "I'm not... I mean, I don't think I am but I can't tell... I'm *not* the heir of Slytherin, am I?"

The hat did the equivalent of a mental blink in surprise. "I don't *think* you are... As far as I can see you haven't done any petrifying but there are gaps here in your memory. There's no telling what you were doing then. If there was –"

"Dumbledore's coming up the stairs," Sir interrupted sharply.

Quick as a flash, Harry whipped the hat off of his head and was just stepping back from returning it to its shelf when the door opened and Dumbledore strode authoritatively in.

"What were you doing with the Sorting Hat?" he demanded sharply. Harry could almost see the wheels turning in his head as he tried to discover the answer behind this new mystery.

"I was just..." he answered automatically. Just what? Just asking the hat whether it had been the old fool before him who had interfered with his sorting? No, that wouldn't go down too well. "I was just asking the hat whether or not it had put me in the right house." If nothing else, this question might put Dumbledore on the defensive and the headmaster would try to steer Harry away from the subject. It might also provide the proof he needed that Dumbledore had been the one to interfere.

"Why would you ask it a question like that?" Nothing substantial there; the headmaster seemed bewildered if anything.

"Well... everyone thinks I'm the heir of Slytherin and I can speak parseltongue which was Slytherin's gift, so I was wondering why it had put me in Gryffindor." Harry was feeling particularly cunning now. In appearance of justifying his hat questioning, he was planting seeds of doubt in Dumbledore's mind about him being Slytherin's heir and they hadn't even begun the proper interrogation that he knew was coming yet.

"And what did the hat say?" the elderly wizard was showing absolutely no emotion and Harry could decipher nothing.

"It said... it said that it wasn't its choice what house I went into." Again his words had a double meaning. For a brief instant, he wondered where this newfound craftiness had come from.

“Indeed,” was all the headmaster replied. Silence lapsed for a few moments. “I wish to speak to you about a somewhat more serious matter: the matter of Slytherin’s heir’s latest attack on Hogwarts.”

Harry shrugged innocently. “What about it?”

Dumbledore tilted his head so that he was looking over his half-moon spectacles sternly at Harry. “I would like to discuss your participation in them.”

“What? But I didn’t do anything!”

“I think you did,” said Dumbledore, not at all abashedly. “This attack bore a striking resemblance to the last –“

“But I didn’t do that one either!”

“Harry,” he replied exasperatedly. “I know that it was you and there was significant evidence against you. There is no use denying the attack on Mrs Norris.”

“But why would I do it?” demanded Harry in return. “I had no reason to be going around petrifying people and I don’t now because it *wasn’t* me!”

“Revenge,” said Dumbledore. “You might have performed these acts as revenge and to disrupt the school.”

“Professor,” he cut in, still in the tone of perfect, indignant, innocence. “Even if I had done the first attack and all the ones since, don’t you think I’d have done something a little less obvious? I mean, you obviously believe that I did the first one so I’d want to throw the scent off me, wouldn’t I? But if the heir was someone else, they’d have no problem doing the same thing twice, would they? None of the blame would fall on them. The culprit’s already been expelled, hasn’t he?”

Dumbledore frowned in thought and Harry knew he had presented a very good argument. He seemed almost to change his mind. He decided to use one last argument.

"The heir's trying to kill off the muggleborns, isn't he, professor?" he asked in a curious tone.

"Yes, I believe you are," replied Dumbledore, not really paying attention.

"Do you think I'm a killer, professor?"

That got the old fool's attention. He simply looked at Harry for a moment and in return Harry examined his nose thoroughly.

"No," he said at length. "I do not believe you are a killer Harry. I believe you are capable of many things but killing is not one of them."

"Then shouldn't you have your proof?"

"I would like you to look me in the eyes, Harry, and tell me that you are not the heir."

Harry knew what Dumbledore was doing. He was planning on reading his mind to see if he was lying whilst he said it but more fool Dumbledore. Saying that he was not the heir was not a lie. Saying that he had not committed the previous day's crimes was. Bracing himself, he looked up into the piercing blue eyes that seemed to stare into his soul.

"I am not the heir of Slytherin."

Dumbledore exhaled loudly. "Very well. You may leave."

At the door, Harry turned, unable to resist the urge to have the last word. "I don't plan on killing anyone, professor. That would mean I was a murderer. Like you."

And before Dumbledore could open his mouth, he was gone, taking the stairs two at a time. He *had* been telling the truth. He *wasn't* a killer. Not yet. Dumbledore would change that. The day that he was finally powerful and skilled enough to confront Dumbledore, it would change. Dumbledore would turn him into a killer.

Over the next week, the school calmed down significantly. New speculation arose as to the identity of Slytherin's heir and despite Dumbledore's assurances that the heir, Jeremy White, had been expelled, talk of the heir, or new heir as some were claiming, was all he heard until the Friday of the next week. Most thought that Jeremy had an accomplice and it was his accomplice now fulfilling his wishes at Hogwarts. Others believed that since Slytherin's heir had been expelled, a new heir had arisen, despite the ludicrousness of the idea. There were very few students who chose to differ from general opinions and believed that Dumbledore had expelled the wrong person in the first place.

Harry was not even considered as a suspect.

The gossip in the school suddenly changed on Friday, however, and animated discussions arose about the Quidditch game the next day, which Harry was *not* looking forward to. He was trying desperately to find a way to get out of it but the only way Harry could think of that would allow him to miss the match was if he fell down a flight of stairs and crushed every bone in his body. He decided against that plan of action. He wouldn't have minded playing that badly but he felt very unpatriotic towards his house. There was just no motivation within him to compete for Gryffindor and against Slytherin, who were notorious for their foul playing.

Harry woke up at half past four on the morning of the match, which was early even for him, and found himself unable to get back to sleep. In honour of his first Quidditch game, Sir had decided that he wouldn't have a lesson that morning, which was bizarrely generous of him, but Harry hadn't complained at the time. At the time it had seemed like a blessing not to have the added strenuous lesson before the game but now that he was awake and with nothing to do, he was beginning to regret his acceptance. He tried reading one of his school books but found he couldn't concentrate on it. In the end, he decided to go for a walk.

The grounds were very dark still, the sun not even thinking about rising yet, and Harry found himself walking in the moonlight beside the lake, trying desperately to come up with a way to avoid the match. The practises hadn't been too bad; he was the seeker which meant he could basically go off and fly on his own. Every practise, however, the Weasley twins would try to engage him in *stimulating* conversation and it was becoming harder and harder to ignore or avoid them. They would be too busy at the match, certainly, to talk to him but the idea of flying in front of so many people that he didn't actually know or like wasn't terribly appealing. Suddenly, he stopped in his tracks, a new idea coming to mind. He had to attend the match - that much was certain - but nothing would stop him doing *badly* at the match.

The more Harry thought about it, the more he liked the idea. It was the perfect way to get his revenge on Gryffindor and they didn't even need to know that it was his fault. He could just say that he had gotten stage fright. Next, his thoughts turned to various ways he could perform badly. He could wait until the Slytherin team was ahead in points before alerting the other seeker to the whereabouts of the snitch and let them catch it or he could take an active part in preventing his team from scoring. He was definitely not going to catch the snitch, he decided. It was only his first match, after all; he couldn't be expected to win it for his team especially when they were playing against the hardest opponents.

Harry grinned wickedly, an even better thought coming into his mind. He would try his hardest to capture the snitch and he would fly his best but no one had told him that he had to do it on his own broom. What he decided to do was to find a school broom, the worst the school owned, cast a glamour spell over it to make it look like his own and then remove the glamour mid-game and blame it on the Slytherins. He would be forced to compete on the worst broom there was and, best of all, he would be completely blameless. The Slytherins wouldn't mind.

After hurrying back to his dorm to retrieve his broom, Harry ventured down to the shed where all the broomsticks were kept to locate the worst. He would need to hide his own broom, of course, and could probably stash it away in the back of the shed, covered by all the

school's brooms. To make sure no one tried to steal it, in case some strange student was poking around the back of the shed during the game for whatever reason, he would simply put some spells upon it. Sir had taught him plenty of useful ones.

The worst broom of the bunch was, quite frankly, a wooden stick that wasn't fit for sweeping dust. The twigs stuck out in more directions than Harry's hair and in the wood of the handle was a massive crack that he was convinced would send the top of the broom flying if it got knocked by a bludger, not that he was planning on being hit by a bludger, of course. Sabotage the game he might do, but kill himself in the process, no, he didn't really want to.

It took some time for Harry to disguise the battered broom as his Nimbus 2000 and it was quite difficult to get each and every detail correct. It wouldn't be too smart of him to go out and ride a broom that said Nimble Too. In the end, he was holding an exact replica of his own broom and the real Nimbus was hidden under a pile of brooms with concealment charms and anti-theft charms heaped upon. He was very proud of his handiwork but had little time to admire it; breakfast would be starting soon and it would be perhaps more than a little suspicious if he was neither in his dormitory or the Great Hall. .

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"Right, now I want a nice clean game," called Madam Hooch to the Gryffindor and Slytherin Quidditch teams that were lined up opposite each other. "From *all* of you. On my whistle then. Three... Two... One!"

They were off. All the players on either side of Harry shot up into the air and the balls were released. He did not so much as shoot up himself but rather rose quickly, broom shuddering underneath him. Malfoy, the Slytherin seeker, did not hesitate to rise above the game and scout for the snitch. At a much more sedate, shaking pace, Harry mimicked him. He had just drawn to the same height as Malfoy, and the blonde had opened his mouth to speak to him, when Harry had to swing under his broom to avoid a bludger that came shooting right for him. With difficulty, he righted himself. He could have flown out of its path but he didn't trust the broom to be quick enough for the task.

“Alright there, Harry?” called George, whacking the bludger from the other side towards the Slytherin keeper.

Harry just glared in return and urged his broom to fly forwards. It obeyed, but it did so at perhaps the pace of a slow jog. There was not much time to dwell on this thought however as he had to roll under his broom again to avoid the bludger that had changed direction mid-course to aim at him. He cursed at it. If it would only leave him alone for a moment he would have time to remove the glamour charm from his broom. The bludger appeared to have other ideas, however, and it swerved after a particularly vicious hit from George to return to Harry, much like there was a homing device on it.

He struggled to make the broom drop altitude quickly and the bludger only just skimmed over his hair. What was going on? Sure, he wasn't a great Quidditch fan but he was sure that bludgers weren't supposed to focus on one player like this. It was just like first year and that time he hadn't even been on a broom! What was it with him? Did the bludgers think he was some sort of magnet for them?

Both the Weasley twins had abandoned the game below them to protect Harry from the rogue bludger and he was becoming increasingly frustrated. With the twins around there was no way he could remove the spell on his broom. He was pretty certain he could handle a measly bludger on his own; after all, he had done it the previous year originally without the aid of a broom.

“Sod off you two! I can handle it!”

“Don't be thick!” called one of the twins in return. It was getting hard to tell them apart and it had started raining, further clouding Harry's vision. “It'll take your head off! It's obviously been tampered with!”

“I can deal with it on my own! I don't need your help!” He didn't either. If there was one thing that annoyed him it was other people trying to help him when he didn't need it. “Look, the team needs you down there; why don't you go help *them*?”

Begrudgingly, the twins returned to the main game, leaving Harry to remove his charm, which he did without hesitation. The broom was looking slightly worse for the wear now that it was wet. The crack in

the handle was looking more pronounced than ever. The wood split away slightly as he forced the handle downwards so that he could dive to avoid the bludger again.

He was beginning to regret his decision in replacing his broom now. He was racing full out to avoid the bludger which apparently he *couldn't* deal with. It skimmed past his arm and immediately swerved to take another shot at him. He dove far below the game to avoid it. Suddenly he remembered his earlier thought about the handle breaking off if it was knocked by a bludger and groaned. Fate did *not* like him. Using all of his strength, Harry tried to pull the broom upwards to avoid the bludger that was rushing at him from below.

The broom wasn't quick enough.

The bludger shot straight into the air, whacking the broom handle hard where he was holding it. Immediately, Harry knew the bones in his left hand fingers had been broken but that wasn't what worried him. What worried him was the fact that he was no longer holding onto the broom but a piece of wood. That, and the fact that the broom flipped up on impact sending him flying off the back of it.

He was falling and falling fast, releasing the piece of wood from his broken fingers as he descended. His breath constricted in his throat. All sound seemed to be silence around him save his pumping heart. Air was rushing past him. He couldn't breath, couldn't think. He was flipping through the air. The ground was soaring towards him.

He landed.

Harry hit the ground hard and felt pain shooting through his body. He simply lay there, breathing hard, heart working at its hardest, sound rushing back to his ears. He felt something stir under his right hand through his black gloves. Raising his head ever so slightly (and wincing at the effort), he lifted his hand to see what was moving and groaned in despair. Underneath his fingers was the tiny golden snitch. That was just *too* unreal. What were the chances? The one thing he had been determined not to do, he had done. He must have hit it mid-air and dragged it down to the ground with him. Clutching it in anger and to relieve the pain he felt, Harry rolled over stiffly so that he was no longer breathing in mud.

His eyes widened in fear for an instant.

The school's now handleless broom had stopped flipping upwards in the air and was falling straight down, directly towards Harry. He didn't have the energy to move his arms quickly enough to stop it as it shot, broken side first, into his stomach.

Luckily, it didn't have quite the momentum to drive far into his stomach and it barely made a small wound. Still, it felt like a troll had punched him in the gut and Harry cried out in pain. The broom was just about to fall, gravity overbalancing it, when Harry's luck completely ran out. The rogue bludger had returned and it paid no attention to the broom in its path as it tried to get to him. It hit the broom hard, like a hammer hitting a nail, driving the small wooden knives a couple of inches into his abdomen. He gave an almighty yell in pain this time.

The pain threatened to overwhelm him and the edges of his vision began to fade. With difficulty, he kept his consciousness, refusing to let that damnable bludger get the better of him. The cursed thing had freed itself from the twigs of the broom and was flying away in order to build up momentum to hit Harry again. Shaking with the effort, he flicked his wand down from his right armed sleeve into his gloved wooden hand. With some of his well needed breath, he fired a "*Reducto!*" at the bludger, hitting it square on and the black ball blew to pieces.

He closed his eyes in pain and gripped the broom that was now firmly lodged in his stomach. Suddenly he became aware of all the sounds that were going on around him. The crowd was screaming, Madam Hooch's whistle was blowing and by the sound of the thuds on the ground, players were landing all about him. People were yelling frantically at each other and then, one excited player shouted,

"Hey, look! He caught the snitch!"

Harry tried to make a sarcastic comment at whoever the speaker was but all that he could manage was a gasp of pain. The voices were ebbing in and out of clarity and he could feel himself slipping into unconsciousness despite his efforts. It was difficult to focus on what anyone person was saying and Harry wasn't sure his ears were being

as reliable as usual as he could swear he heard someone start talking about car crashes.

“Out of the way! Out of the way! I’ll set him straight! That broom just needs a little pulling and it’ll come out fine.”

From somewhere above him, he was sure this was Lockhart’s voice. He tried to curse the man but he had just opened his mouth when the broom was tugged on sharply. He gave an anguished cry of pain as ripples of fire shot through his body.

“On the other hand,” said Lockhart. “Perhaps it’s best we leave it where it is.”

Then everything faded out of existence.

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Harry faded into consciousness but only just. He was vaguely aware that he was no longer being rained on and that there was significantly less noise. He must have been moved to the Hospital Wing. Oh, how he *loved* to visit the sterile white room. He did not however, have the strength to even open his eyes. Weakness along with shots of pain wracked his body and he was finding it terribly hard to breathe properly. Somewhere above him he thought he heard Madam Pomfrey talking.

“I’ve done all I can for him at the moment,” she was saying to someone. “I have removed the broom, given him a potion for the pain and closed the wound as best I can but it will break open if he does too much exercise over the next couple of days. I’m worried about his wet clothes, however. I have cut them away from his stomach and the wound but I was unable to remove them from his arms, or his gloves from his hands...”

“Most peculiar...”

Darkness claimed him once more.

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“Come on, Mister Potter, wake up. I refuse to leave you in wet clothes any longer.”

The pain in Harry’s stomach had lessened considerably but there was still a constant throb spreading throughout his body. He had about as much energy as a slug, he felt, and he really didn’t want to open his eyes but whoever was talking to him was obviously not leaving him in peace until he had. If he’d had the strength he would have glared but all he could manage was to raise his eyelids flickeringly away from his eyes. Madam Pomfrey was there staring down at him.

“Mister Potter, I am convinced you have broken three fingers in your left hand but I cannot treat them until you have removed your gloves. I would also like for you to change into this.”

She was holding up some item of clothing or other but Harry found it too hard to concentrate on the article. He made a noise of assent and dragged himself up to change after she had drawn the curtains round his bed. It was difficult with his broken fingers to remove his Quidditch robe and change into the clothes Madam Pomfrey had given him, not to mention the fact that even breathing too deeply caused pain to flare outwards from his stomach. He didn’t bother to look at it, too afraid at what he might see. The gown that he had put on did not cover his wooden arm and blearily he wondered what he was going to do for a second when the black glove that remained on his hand extended itself and grew in length to cover the entirety of the wood. He carefully peeled off his left hand glove then lay back on the bed, consciousness already deserting him.

“Thanks, Sir,” he mumbled before succumbing to the darkness again.

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When Harry woke this time, he was feeling much better rested and the pain from his stomach was almost non-existent. He knew it should rightfully be agony but Madam Pomfrey had most likely given him something for the pain. His head was clearer too and he was no longer completely incapable of recognising what was going on around him. Taking a deep breath, which was a far sight easier now than it had been, Harry opened his eyes and saw, to his surprise, that it was night.

“Hello Mister Harry Potter, sir!”

He jumped in alarm as a tiny house-elf’s head suddenly rose before him to look over the bedside. It was most unlike the house-elves he had met at Hogwarts; instead of the usual tea cosy, this elf was wearing an old pillowcase with rips for arm and leg holes. It seemed to have a kind of excited energy about it too that the other elves most certainly did not possess.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded at once. If he was right in assuming that this elf was not a Hogwarts House-elf, then it must have been sent to him by some old wizarding family. And if *that* was the case there was no telling if the family meant him harm or not.

“Dobby has come to warn Mister Harry Potter, sir! Dobby has heard that Mister Harry Potter has come to Hogwarts and Dobby must tell him that he must leave!”

“What are you talking about? Who ordered you to do this?” This had to be some plot or other to make Harry leave Hogwarts and go where he was most vulnerable, surely.

“No one has ordered Dobby to come, sir. Dobby has come of his own choice and Dobby’s masters will be very angry if they is finding out Dobby is here! But Dobby had to come, sir! Dobby must warn Harry Potter! There is a plot, Mister Harry Potter, sir! A plot to make most terrible things happen at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry this year,” Dobby was leaning in close now and speaking in a fearful whisper. Harry wasn’t convinced the elf wasn’t lying.

“Yeah,” he said disbelievingly. “Like what?”

“Dobby can’t say, sir! Dobby is already been telling Harry Potter too much! Dobby is being have to shut his ears in the oven door!” As if to demonstrate the fact that he was going to punish himself, the house-elf started banging his head on the wall.

“Look, stop that will you? You’ll wake everyone up.”

“Harry Potter, sir!” cried Dobby, ceasing his head banging. “You must go home! You must not stay at Hogwarts!”

“*What* home, Dobby? I haven’t *got* a home! Besides, I need to stay here – I need to learn magic!”

“No, Mister Harry Potter! You is having to leave! You is being in terrible danger in being at Hogwarts! Dobby thought his bludger would –“

“*Your* bludger?” Harry growled, furious. This house-elf was responsible for him winning the Quidditch game and being *impaled* by a broomstick? “You made that bludger try and kill me?”

“Not kill you, sir, never kill you!” squeaked Dobby in shock. “Dobby wants to save your live! Better sent home, grievously injured, than remain here, sir! Dobby only wanted Harry Potter hurt enough to be sent home!”

“But I haven’t *got* a home to be sent to, Dobby! Dumbledore wouldn’t let me leave again if the Dark Lord himself came and visited me.”

“But Harry Potter cannot stay!” cried the elf. “Terrible things are to happen at Hogwarts, are perhaps happening already, and Dobby cannot let Harry Potter stay here now that history is to repeat itself, now that the Chamber of Secrets is open once more –“

The elf froze, horror struck and started ramming his head into the wall again. Harry did not stop him this time, his mind too busy reeling with the implications of what the elf had said. The Chamber of Secrets was *real* and it had been opened *before*. Well, that was certainly interesting. He definitely hadn’t opened it the first time it had been opened; he wouldn’t have been at Hogwarts when it did. It didn’t answer the question if he was opening it *now* though. If it was some part of some great plot, there was no telling that he hadn’t been caught up in it.

“Dobby, who’s the heir of Slytherin?” Harry demanded when the elf finally stopped banging his head off the wall.

“Dobby can’t, sir, Dobby can’t, Dobby mustn’t tell! Please, ask no more of Dobby! Go home, Harry Potter, go home!”

Slower than he'd have like to, Harry threw back the covers of his bed and got up out of it. The floor was freezing under his bare feet and he wondered briefly why Dobby wasn't shivering with cold. He reached towards the elf, determined to not let him go until he had his answers but his hands closed on thin air. Dobby had disappeared with a loud crack.

Sighing, he climbed back into bed, trying to warm his cold feet, his stomach throbbing horribly. Once more he succumbed to sleep, his mind too exhausted to think much more about the Chamber of Secrets.

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When Harry next awoke, it was still dark so he could not have slept for too long. Strangely enough, his first thought was not of what had awoken him but the fact that he was no longer under the covers. He glanced down at himself. He was now lying on top of the bed rather than in it. Either he had some new peculiar sleeping habits or there was something off. Swinging his feet off the side of the bed, he sat up, winced slightly at the pain, and frowned at his feet.

He was wearing shoes. He was certain he hadn't been when he had fallen asleep after meeting Dobby. No, he definitely hadn't; the floor had been freezing under his feet. So why was he wearing shoes now? Maybe he had been sleepwalking... Or maybe someone else had put them on for him. Harry quickly dismissed that thought; why would someone else put shoes on for him? It wouldn't help them out much especially if he was asleep.

The door to the Hospital Wing creaked open and a small figure slipped silently in, obviously intent on not being noticed. Even with his glasses on – which he had retrieved from his bedside table – Harry couldn't tell who it was in the darkness. They were creeping without a sound and looked like they were heading for him. Feeling slightly apprehensive, he grabbed his wand from the bedside table in case the figure should feel the need to attack him. The small person reached inside their robes and withdrew something that looked horribly like a knife. They were still heading directly for him. They

walked under a patch of moonlight from the window and Harry finally saw who it was.

“Gods, Nymph!” he exclaimed. She jumped about a foot in the air and gave a small shriek of surprise.

“Caw, Harry, you coulda let me know you were awake!”

Harry mouthed at her like a fish for a moment. *He* could have let her know he was awake? *She* could have let him know she wasn’t a mad axe murderer! “You could have not advanced on me in the dark with a *knife*!”

“What?” she asked confusedly once she had reached his bed. Her dark hair was falling over her face which, Harry supposed, had not lessened the threatening look about her as she moved towards him in the dark. She held up the knife. “Oh, you means this? This is yours! You dropped it at the Quidditch pitch and I were not wanting to give it back to you with all them teachers swarming round. Here you are, then. So how are you? That broom hit you pretty hard, huh?” She asked after depositing the knife on his bedside table. Likewise, Harry returned his wand to there.

“Really? I’d have never known,” he replied sarcastically. “Nymph, I was speared by a *broom*, how’d you think I am?”

“Grumpy.” Harry rolled his eyes at her. “That’s not all I came for neither,” she continued cheerfully. “I were wanting to know if you was wanting to come with me. I’m gonna paint a picture of the monster in the Chamber of Secrets on the Great Hall doors.”

Harry laughed. Nymph was quite good at drawing when she tried but she had never exactly drawn a serious picture. “Gods, that sounds like fun but I don’t think I can.”

Nymph frowned at him and for a moment she looked really upset. He was sure he imagined it though as she was merely frowning thoughtfully at him a second later. “How come?”

He lifted up his top to show her the bandage around his stomach. To his and her alarm, it was stained red. The wound must have broken

open somehow. "It hurts to sit up, Nymph. I don't think I'm in much state for painting."

She sighed in disappointment. "You never do anything fun with me anymore. You're always around with those *Gryffindors*."

Frowning at her for a moment, Harry debated with himself whether he should tell her his latest scheme. In the end, his loyalty to Nymph won out and he explained to her about his efforts at making Dumbledore and the teachers think he had changed in order to escape being a suspect when he did anything untoward, like the "attack" by the heir of Slytherin. He also explained that it was him that had organised the whole affair.

"Gods, Harry! Why didn't you tell me before! I'd have helped! Anyway, looks, I gotta go paint a pretty picture. I'll be seeing you around, yeah?"

He nodded and she slipped away in the darkness towards the exit again. Just when she had reached the door, however, when footsteps could be heard walking down the passageway outside. Harry dove back into his bed with a hiss of pain as Nymph very originally hid behind the door. If there had been time, he would have yelled at her stupidity.

A second later, Dumbledore was backing into the Hospital Wing wearing a long woolly dressing gown and a nightcap. Harry cursed the man mentally; it would be him that caught Nymph. The headmaster was carrying one end of what looked like a statue and Professor McGonagall appeared a second later carrying its feet. They walked right passed Nymph, not bothering to look behind the door where she was hiding. As soon as they had passed, Nymph darted out of the door, pausing long enough to wave McGonagall's handkerchief which she must have stolen from her pocket. Then, she disappeared and the two professors deposited the statue on a bed none the wiser.

"Get Madam Pomfrey," whispered Dumbledore, and McGonagall hurried past the end of Harry's bed and out of sight. Harry lay still, pretending to be asleep, his mind whirring. What was going on? He heard urgent voices and then McGonagall hurried back into view

followed closely by Madam Pomfrey, pulling a cardigan over her nightdress. He heard a sharp intake of breath.

“What happened?” Madam Pomfrey whispered to Dumbledore, bending over the statue.

“Another attack,” answered Dumbledore. “Minerva found him on the stairs.”

“There was a bunch of grapes next to him,” added McGonagall. “We think he was trying to sneak up here to visit Potter.”

Harry blinked in surprise. He raised himself carefully and slowly to get a look at the statue. A ray of moonlight lay across its staring face. He did not immediately recognise the boy but eventually he associated him with a first year Gryffindor that was always taking pictures of him with his camera. The boy’s hands were still stuck up in front of him holding his camera.

The teachers’ voices faded from Harry’s thoughts as they discussed the boy. He was stunned. He felt no real pity for the boy; he barely knew him. What he was more scared about was the fact that Nymph too had snuck up to visit him. It could have very easily been her lying there but she would have had no camera to protect herself from the basilisk’s glare. She would have been lying there dead.

For a brief instant, he felt relief. There was no way he could have set the basilisk on the boy; he had been in the Hospital Wing the entire time. Then the horrible thought of his shoes, still on his feet, struck him. He had woken on top of his covers wearing his shoes but who was to say that he had been asleep? He never remembered it when he was in a deep sleep but he never remembered where he was whenever someone had been petrified either. Maybe he *hadn’t* been in the Hospital Wing; he could have been outside it and would have never known.

He was brought out of his thoughts when there was a hiss from the boy’s bed. Dumbledore had prised the camera out of his hands and opened it. The smell of burnt plastic reached Harry’s nostrils and he knew the basilisk must have melted the film in the boy’s camera.

"Melted," said Madam Pomfrey wonderingly. "All melted..."

"What does this *mean*, Albus?" asked McGonagall urgently.

"It means," said Dumbledore. "That the Chamber of Secrets has definitely been reopened."

Madam Pomfrey clapped a hand to her mouth. McGonagall stared at Dumbledore. Harry wondered vaguely how they could have supposed it *not* to be opened again with all that had been going on.

"Yes," continued Dumbledore. "This is the fourth victim so far, not including the seventeen individuals who recovered from the other day. Mrs Norris, Justin Finch-Fletchly, Sir Nicholas and now Colin Creevey. Two students, a cat and a ghost."

"But Albus... surely... *who*?"

Harry heard, rather than saw, them turn simultaneously in his direction. His eyes had closed in thought.

"Albus, you don't think... was it him?"

He could swear Dumbledore had frowned in thought, though how he knew this Harry did not know. "I am unsure," said the headmaster at last. "I originally believed it to be him but now... now I am not so sure. Poppy, has he left the Hospital Wing this evening?"

"To my knowledge, headmaster," replied Madam Pomfrey. "He has not left his bed."

But he *had* left his bed. He was wearing *shoes*. Through his top and bandage, Harry felt a hot liquid seep through. His wound had opened and was bleeding. Madam Pomfrey had said that would only happen if he moved around too much. If he had not left his bed, how had it broken open and why was he wearing shoes? For the first time since the day his aunt died, Harry was truly terrified.

He was not scared of the basilisk. He was not scared of the Dark Lord. He was not scared of Dumbledore.

He was scared of himself.

It was almost a week before Harry was released from the clutches of Madam Pomfrey, much to his dismay. The entire time he spent under her care she was fussing over him and was constantly pestering him to inspect his still gloved hand and now arm. Above all else, he was extremely bored sitting in the Hospital Wing, forbidden from leaving his bed. He couldn't even talk to Sir Iest Madam Pomfrey thought he was going crazy talking to himself. The most exciting thing that had happened had been a visit from Professor McGonagall. Well, perhaps it hadn't been that exciting but it was unexpected.

"I am here, Potter," she had said. "To congratulate you on your spectacular capture of the snitch."

Of course, Harry's immediate reaction had been suspicion. Why would McGonagall want to congratulate him on his amazing ploughing into the ground? Pushing his suspicion aside, he had replied, "Well, I'm glad you liked it. I had a spiffing time doing it too but unfortunately I don't think I'll be playing much more Quidditch."

"What do you mean?" she asked in confusion. "You are aware, Mister Potter, that you are still required to play for the Gryffindor Quidditch team."

"Are you kidding me? Every time I get on a broom a bloody bludger decides I'm the only one still flying!"

McGonagall looked at him sternly. "Mister Potter, you *will* continue as you have been or there *will* be severe repercussions. Do not think you are completely free from suspicion. The headmaster may have changed his mind about you but I do not forgive so easily." She had leaned in closer so that she could speak in lower tones. "I have questioned the Slytherin team and all genuinely seem to know nothing about the rogue bludger *or* the switching of your broom. I don't know what you were trying to pull out there but it won't happen again. Am I clear?"

"If you think I'm really that suicidal, you're even more foolish than I thought."

“Potter,” she had growled warningly. “No more, you hear? I will be monitoring your behaviour very closely in future and if you are conveniently missing and another pupil is attacked, I will personally make sure you are *really* punished.” She had then stormed out of the Hospital Wing, in a much worse mood than she had entered in.

All in all, Harry was not a cheerful person when he was at last discharged. It did not help matters either that the moment he was released Sir demanded the go to the Room so that he could teach Harry a “valuable lesson”. After much grumbling and complaining, the first place he headed was, in fact, the Room as Sir instructed. Generally, the disembodied voice had good ideas and reasoning.

“*Today,*” said Sir, in his whispering voice. *“I intend to teach you the beginnings of occlumency.”*

Harry said nothing. He supposed he ought to have heard of this “occlumency” thing but really Sir expected too much of him. There was no plausible way that he was capable of hearing of every single thing the voice came up with before he said it. No, usually he found it best just to remain silent and wait for him to launch into the explanation that was obviously coming. Either that or Sir would just launch right into teaching him without explaining what it was he was teaching.

“Occlumency,” sighed Sir. *“Is the art of blocking your mind against legilimency, which to you is mind reading. Really, don’t you ever pick up a book of your own free will and not under instruction? It couldn’t hurt, you know.”*

“And exactly how many books would you have me pick up while I’m unconscious in the hospital wing?”

“*There is no need for that tone. You have plenty of opportunities to read. Reading is only the beginning of understanding. Understanding is the beginning of power.*”

“Yes, Sir,” Harry sighed. He was too tired to argue. He’d have thought that after several days in the hospital wing in bed that he would have been teeming with energy but no, all it seemed to have accomplished

was to make him tired and irritable. “So what’s involved in the mind reading blocking thing?”

He could almost see the disdainful look that Sir would have given him if it were possible. *“First of all, the mind is not to be read like some common book. It is not nearly so simple. The mind is a complex thing – and in your case I am sure that it is a muddle of thoughts and feelings with no semblance of order. I would know; I have to endure your strange trains of thought every day. Because of that, it is very easy to tell what you are thinking merely by the look on your face. No matter how hard you try to block them out, some will slip by unnoticed purely because of your lack of organisation.”*

Harry, feeling more than a little annoyed by this rather longwinded way to tell him that he ought to be more organised, glared at the bare wall in front of him. Oh, what he would give that Sir was an actual person and not residing in his own body. It would make it so much easier to glare at him.

“Occlumency is a difficult skill to learn; even more so than its counterpart legilimency. Very few full grown wizards are capable of utilising it. Occlumency demands organisation of the mind, a strong willpower to defend it and the ability to focus on nothing at all. I am... uncertain whether you will be capable of it or not. I have a suspicion that it may be beyond your capacity.”

“Hey!” cried Harry indignantly. Just because Sir was so *great* at everything didn’t mean that he wasn’t capable of doing them too. “I can do anything you can do if I knew *how*!”

“Good. Prepare yourself for a long lesson.”

It did, indeed prove to be a most long and arduous lesson. Sir started by spending a further ten minutes explaining precisely *why* he didn’t expect Harry to succeed in even the basics of occlumency. *Apparently*, he thought many things without realising that he was even thinking about them. So, theoretically, he was to realise when he was thinking about something and stop. His first task was therefore to stop any unwanted thoughts from surfacing and to be completely aware of all those that did. According to Sir, this would build the foundation for creating shields around his mind. It would be

impossible to protect something that he didn't know was there and if his thoughts continued to surface without his knowledge, they would simply slip around his shield anyway.

It also turned out that simply recognising thoughts and stopping having them subconsciously was easier said than done. For perhaps one of the most aggravating hours of his life, Harry was forced to sit in the Room thinking. He was not allowed to do anything else. He just sat there, thinking.

"I think that shall be all for today," said Sir at last, much to Harry's relief. *"I want you to practise clearing your mind every opportunity you can, whether it is within a class, during Quidditch practise or right before you are asleep. Without frequent practise, you will never achieve anything in this aspect. I will be watching."*

With some considerable effort, Harry refrained from pointing out that it was impossible for Sir *not* to be watching. How much was there that could occupy your attention when you were stuck in someone else's body? He was too glad to be freed from his perpetual boredom, however, to argue. If he had disputed the terms, Sir might never have released him and he would be stuck, staring into space, for all eternity.

Unfortunately, he was not freed quite from his boredom. He had missed several lessons and when McGonagall had visited him in the hospital wing she had deposited a considerable amount of homework that was expected of him in order for him to catch up on the work he had missed. Consequently, he found himself – rather depressingly – in the library, searching for books that would aid him.

He was just locating a particularly heavy tome on the method of transfiguring plate to a ball when someone grabbed him from behind. On instinct, Harry took hold of the arms that had attempted to grip his neck and propelled his attacker forwards, ducking and tripping them up as he did so. It was not until his assailant had flown well and truly into a bookcase that he had a good look at their face.

"Gods, Nymph! You *could* warn me before you decide to attack me!"

Nymph, black hair strewn over her face and legs sprawled out in front of her, coughed. "Hey, you're the one who reacts to everything with violence."

"I only reacted with violence," retorted Harry good-naturedly. "Because you *attacked* me rather violently."

"I did not!"

"Yes, you did!"

"No, I didn't!"

"Right, you two!" Madam Pince had made herself present on the scene of the crime, looking quite fearsome as she spotted several of her precious books that had been knocked onto the floor. "You have disturbed this library long enough! Out with you! *Both* of you!" she added when it looked like they were about to protest. "And I don't want to see you in here again until after Christmas!"

After marching them out of the library, Madam Pince stalked off back inside to replace any fallen books on their shelves, muttering angrily about "young hooligans". Nymph pulled a rather childish face at her retreating back before turning back to Harry.

"Where were we? Oh yeah, no, I didn't!"

"What the hell do you think grabbing someone from behind is if it's not attacking them?" asked Harry, not missing a beat.

"I weren't *attacking* you!" Nymph replied brightly. "I were giving you a hug, of course!"

Harry took one look at the earnestness of her face before they both burst out laughing and began walking away from the library. The idea that Nymph would randomly give him a hug from behind was actually laughable. Attack, sure, hug, never.

"See," said Nymph teasingly once they had calmed down somewhat. "If you wasn't so stuck in them books all the time then you could be

having so much more fun with *me*. I means, anyone would think you was hiding something being cooped up so much.”

“Well, you know,” said Harry, in a similarly conversational tone. “It’s cause I’m the heir of Slytherin. After all, that’s what I was expelled for, wasn’t it?”

“Aw, don’t worry, Harry,” Nymph said comfortingly, her voice suddenly serious. “I believes you that you aren’t.”

Harry was filled with an unexpected warmth. For some reason, Nymph’s unprecedented belief in him really made him feel a little less tired and worn.

“Besides,” continued Nymph, her mischievous spark back in her eyes. “You couldn’t be the heir of Slytherin. That’s me.”

“*Nymph*,” groaned Harry. She really knew how to kill a mood.

She grinned. “Just kidding but really, you did miss one hell of a picture that I drew. Dumbledore charmed it off the doors though. It was awesome, six different heads, twenty-two eyes and one leg. You’d never see anything like it.”

“You don’t know who *is* the heir, do you?” Harry could not resist asking. She might know; she was, after all, a Slytherin. He was really quite curious to know who it was that was attacking the students so ruthlessly. Assuming it wasn’t him, of course.

“Nah, not a clue,” she said dispiritedly. “I gots a feeling Draco knows, though, but he won’t tell me anything.”

Vaguely Harry wondered how long she had referred to the blonde as Draco but he did not voice his question. She might get offended for some reason or other.

“Where are you staying this Christmas?” Nymph asked suddenly, bringing him out of his musings.

“Staying here, I suppose,” Harry sighed. “Don’t think Dumbledore will let me leave. Not after last summer.”

Nymph looked inexplicably saddened at this.

“Why, where are you staying?”

“I’m going back to my aunt and uncle, aren’t I? I’ve still got that deal thing to hold and if I don’t then they’ll probably go to Dumbledore and I’ll be damned if I’m letting him get involved.”

“I’m sorry.”

“What? What’s you got to be sorry for? If I wants to help you, I bloody well will. There ain’t no way you’re stopping me doing something if I want to. It were my choice, not yours.”

“Yeah, but if I hadn’t needed –“

“If I didn’t want to help you, I wouldn’t have,” Nymph cut him off, turning to face him menacingly. “You got nothing to be sorry for.”

They walked in silence for a moment.

“Well, I’m free this summer – want to get “kidnapped” again?”

“Yeah, sure, sounds like fun.”

Sure enough, when McGonagall went round with a list of those who would be staying at Hogwarts for Christmas, she less than debatably informed him that he was staying over the holidays. He wouldn’t have minded being told, as he already suspected as much, but the way she said it so indisputably irked him somewhat and it took some of his almighty restraint to avoid getting into a rather loud argument with her about it.

Other than that, he wasn’t too bothered by the whole affair. In fact, since most of the student body were terrified of the heir of Slytherin, fewer people than usual were staying. The only Gryffindors staying, much to Harry’s annoyance, were the Weasleys, Hermione and Neville. However, Malfoy was also staying and he thought it was the perfect opportunity to ask the blonde a few questions. He couldn’t let anyone realise this, though, so he would have to talk to Malfoy in a place and disguise that no one would connect him with.

Fortunately, Harry knew just how to create such a situation.

Harry emerged from the Room with a smirk plastered across his face. The vast majority of the castle's occupants had gone home for Christmas and it hadn't been too hard to persuade Ron to leave him alone. It had just taken a couple of meaningful looks at the twins for them to take him off his hands after they had returned to the Gryffindor common room after Christmas dinner. From there, he had rushed to the Room and applied many glamour charms. Now, he looked very unlike himself. In fact, he looked exactly like Jeremy White.

Striding confidently in the direction of the Slytherin common room, Harry hummed to himself cheerfully. There was little chance that he would run into anyone; Dumbledore he knew for a fact to be making holiday visits to a few acquaintances. If he did happen to pass by a student (who would no doubt panic), he could always perform a memory charm on them. He had just learnt how to cast memory charms but he wasn't skilled enough at them to be able to select certain memories to erase. Well, if he could live with gaps in his memory, so could they.

He arrived outside the entrance to the Slytherin common room within record time. To be fair, he had the marauder's map to thank and now that he was there, he found himself consulting it again for the password. Sure enough, the map complied and beside the small dot labelled "*Harry Potter*", a small speech bubble appeared. Smirk widening at the thought of Malfoy's face as soon as he entered the Slytherin quarters, Harry quickly said, "Pureblood," to the bare stretch of wall that was displayed in front of him now. A stone door concealed in the wall slid open and Harry marched through.

The Slytherin common room was a long, low underground room with rough stone walls and ceiling, from which round greenish lamps were hanging on chains. A fire was crackling under an elaborately carved mantelpiece. There were many chairs in the room but only one of them was occupied. Unsurprisingly, it was Malfoy, who leapt up and started gaping like a fish at the sight of Harry in his guise.

"I – you – what the hell?" Malfoy spluttered, very much unlike his usual dignified self.

"Nice to see you too, Malfoy," drawled Harry casually, laughing inwardly at Malfoy's face. He would have laughed outwardly too but he felt that would ruin his image somewhat and allow the other boy time to regain his senses. "Do sit down."

Malfoy, still opening and closing his mouth wordlessly, obeyed automatically by falling back into his chair. Harry walked over and took one next to him, trying his best to act like this was something that he did every day. For a few moments neither of them said anything, Malfoy too stunned, Harry too amused.

"What are you doing?" asked Malfoy finally.

Harry paused. Did Malfoy want to know what he was doing disguised as Jeremy or what he was doing in the Slytherin common room? No matter, he would answer both options. If Malfoy relaxed a little, he would be more willing to tell him what *he* wanted.

"Well, I knew no one would connect me with Jeremy White if they saw me and I wanted to talk to you. I figured the Slytherin common room would be the most private place to do so... Not many people are going to walk in on us here, are they?"

The Slytherin simply looked at him for a few moments as if considering the truthfulness of his answer. "How on earth did you not end up in Slytherin?"

Harry laughed. "Just bad luck, I guess. Gods, I wish I *had* been sorted into Slytherin. Those Gryffindors are driving me mental... it's like every five minutes that someone mentions how *great* and *noble* Dumbledore is."

Again, Malfoy looked at him calculatingly for a few seconds before answering. "I take it you think otherwise."

"You know I do," said Harry irritably. If Malfoy hadn't already known, he was a lot more unobservant than he had thought. "But there's nothing I can do about him. Not yet, anyways."

“Are you the heir of Slytherin?” Malfoy asked abruptly.

Well, there was no beating around the bush here. Although, Harry was rather thankful that the other boy had brought up the topic first; this way it would seem less like he was interrogating him, which was what he wanted. He would get a lot more information if Malfoy didn't suspect him of anything.

“No,” he sighed, as if regrettably. “I take it you don't know who is then?”

“No,” sighed the other boy, in the same tone. “I take it *you* don't know who it is?”

“No, I don't. All I know is that it's definitely real and that it's been opened before.” He chose not to mention the small detail of the identity of the monster; he wasn't sure why, but he wanted to keep at least something a secret.

“How did *you* know that? I knew it too, of course – father told me. He won't tell me much else about it though, only that it was fifty years ago and that time a Mudblood *died* and the culprit was expelled, probably still in Azkaban. I'm to keep my head down and let the heir get on with it, apparently, but I wish I knew who it *was*!”

After a slight hesitation, Harry explained about the house-elf, Dobby, when he was in the hospital wing. Malfoy seemed quite at ease and every time Harry let a little information pass his lips, Malfoy seemed to do likewise.

“You *are* joking?”

“No, why? I'm pretty certain the elf was crazy, mind, so I wouldn't read too much into it.”

“Dobby is *my* house-elf! Just wait till I tell Father!”

“*Your* house-elf?”

“Yeah... I wonder how it knew about the Chamber being opened this year.”

Harry's mind was whirring. Malfoy's father, Lucius Malfoy, seemed to know an awful lot about the Chamber of Secrets, both its opening this time and the last. Dobby must have heard about the Chamber from in Malfoy's house but what exactly had he heard? It might have been that Lucius might have had word from his son that the Chamber was open and then discussed it at home. Or he might have known it was going to open prior to Halloween. In that case, he was bound to know who the culprit was, which would make it highly unlikely that it was him. Then again, it could just be that Lucius had wanted to discuss it with his wife after hearing about it from Draco. It was really quite impossible to tell.

Just then, a loud thud outside the common room brought both the boys out of their thoughts. Malfoy blinked in surprise and rose from his seat to look outside. Crabbe and Goyle stumbled in, muttering about forgetting the password, before stopping in surprise at the sight of Harry sitting quite comfortably in their common room.

"Do sit down," he said sweetly, relishing in the fact that they too were stunned enough to obey without question.

"You don't mind?" Malfoy asked Harry, resuming his seat.

"Nah, it's fine." Crabbe and Goyle were thick enough that even should he accidentally let slip that he was Harry Potter and not just Jeremy, they would probably forget about it. Even if that was not the case, he trusted Malfoy enough to keep them quiet. He didn't trust Malfoy much more than that, but that was the only important thing at present.

"Have you two been pigging out in the Great Hall all this time?" Malfoy asked the two lugs, with a hint of disgust in his voice.

They nodded dumbly, still staring at Harry. "What're you doing here?" grunted Crabbe, quite tactlessly.

"Just popped in for a social visit," he replied mildly. "By the way, Malfoy, you know that incident recently with all the snakes, the suits of armour, the temporary petrification and the new message?"

"Yes..."

Harry grinned. "That was all me."

"Really? Impressive. I didn't know you had it in you."

"Well, I was expelled for opening the Chamber, remember."

"Ah, true. I'll be sure to write to Father about that other... incident... we discussed earlier but I won't say anything about that particular escapade. I'm not quite sure how I would go about informing him, anyway."

"Let me know if he says anything about the Chamber, yeah? And what happens to your elf."

"Sure. Father says that the school needs ridding of all the Mudblood filth, but not to get mixed up in it but I'm not sure where exactly you would come into that equation. Of course, he's got a lot on his plate at the moment. You know the Ministry of Magic raided our Manor last week?"

"Really? What did they do that for?"

"Yeah... Luckily, they didn't find much. Father's got some very valuable Dark Arts stuff. But luckily, we've got our own secret chamber under the drawing-room floor –"

"Ho!" cried Crabbe, cutting off Malfoy.

Both he and Harry turned to stare at him. Crabbe blushed and it seemed to spread right up into his hair. Before anyone could say anything else, both Crabbe and Goyle had leapt to their feet.

"Sore stomach," grunted Crabbe and without further ado both the large apes had dashed out of the common room.

"Well, that was odd," commented Harry lightly once the door had closed behind them.

"Yes, it was rather, wasn't it?" agreed Malfoy. "I assure you, they're normally not nearly so strange. Must be all those Christmas cakes

they've been stuffing their faces with. I imagine they can't have gone down well."

"Yeah, they –" Harry cut off as the door to the common room opened once more.

It was Snape.

Harry swore and leapt to his feet, drawing both his wand and a knife as he did so. It took a few seconds for Snape to register what he was seeing but once he had, he was no slower at drawing his own wand and levelling it at Harry, whilst giving him one of his famous glares that he reserved for him alone.

"I do believe," said Snape silkily. "That you were *expelled*, White."

"Well, I do believe that you are in great need of a shower but you don't hear me using that as a form of greeting, do you?" Harry retorted instinctively. He was already in a spot of bother; there was no reason he couldn't at least get his own back at Snape whilst he was in it.

"I would deduct points but it would seem that you don't belong to a house, do you, *White*." Snape glanced at Malfoy, who was also standing but was the only one not to have drawn his wand. "Mister Malfoy, why on earth have you been meeting with *White*?"

"I wasn't," said the blonde quickly. "I just came in the common room and he was here."

If he hadn't been so focused on watching Snape's reaction, Harry would have been slightly annoyed that Malfoy was so quick to defend himself. Then again, he, Harry, was already condemned so there was no reason why the Slytherin should be likewise.

"I find it peculiar," snarled Snape, appearing to lose his restraint on himself. "That you would be in a common room of a school which you no longer attend, *White*. Furthermore, you are not even in the house which you *were* a member of. I am going to ask you now, to *get out*."

"Well," said Harry reasonably. "Since I am no longer a member of this school and was never a member of Slytherin house, as you so very astutely pointed out, you actually have no authority over me, so I think I shall do as I please."

"Malfoy," snarled Snape. "Leave. I shall deal with you later." Obviously Snape wanted Malfoy gone so he could murder Harry without witness. The blonde obediently skittered up the stairs to the dormitories but Harry was convinced that he was still listening.

"What's this really about, Snivellus?" asked Harry condescendingly.

"*Do not call me that!*" Snape was turning slightly red, which did not compliment his sallow skin at *all*. He advanced threateningly. "Dumbledore may have changed his mind about you but rest assured, I know you for what you really are – an arrogant, violent, insolent *Gryffindor*. Well, there's no friend to save you this time, Potter."

"That's right," Harry growled back, circling Snape. "There's no small boy for you to *murder* this time, *Snape*. You even had to send Malfoy out of the room. Scared he was going to interfere? I mean, I know you've never been great at anything other than your *precious* potions but you really are a coward when you know a couple of *second* years can easily defeat you."

"Don't call *me* coward! That's more than a little hypocritical, don't you think? After all, *you* were the one who ran and left your friend at my mercy. *You* were the one who abandoned him."

Harry said nothing, merely glared, planning how he was going to escape this situation without serious repercussions.

"Your days are numbered, *Potter*. Do you know how easily it would be to *accidentally* slip a truth potion into your food during mealtimes? You would spill all of your little secrets and then Dumbledore would realise what you were truly like. Or, I could simply inform him of our situation here. It would only take a spell to do it, you know. Then, finally, the great Harry Potter, saviour of the wizarding world, would be gone from Hogwarts forever."

“Dumbledore wouldn’t expel me,” Harry pointed out, though it was rather obvious. Then he blinked, the true meaning behind those words suddenly occurring to him. Slowly, surprised himself, he said, “Dumbledore wouldn’t expel me if I blew up the astronomy tower. He wouldn’t expel me for *anything*. I can do whatever I want and he won’t be able to do a damn thing about it for fear of losing his precious Harry Potter. Besides, who do you think he will believe? Me, the reformed criminal, playing Quidditch and doing well in all his classes, or you, the prejudiced potions professor, renowned for hating the “boy-who-lived”?”

“By the time I am down with you,” snapped Snape. “It will be only my word! I intend to leave you in no condition to argue! *Tarantallegra!*”

Instinctively, Harry ducked and dived forwards, trying to get closer to Snape. He wasn’t positive of Snape’s duelling skills but there was a good chance that the professor would be able to beat him in a duel. If he didn’t have his wand, however, and they were forced into muggle fighting, Harry was sure to win.

“*Expelliarmus!*” cried Harry and then he sent another two of the spell at Snape vocally followed by another three silently.

At the first sign of a spell, Snape had conjured a shield and the first two spells had bounced off it harmlessly. The third caused it to waver and falter. The fourth, an unspoken one, took Snape by surprise and passed through his shield but he merely sidestepped it. The next one however caused Snape to backtrack and fall into his original position, where the last one hit and caused his wand to fly from his hands. If it had been even a slightly more complicated spell, Harry was doubtful whether he’d have been able to send them off in such quick succession. Nevertheless, it had worked and Snape was wandless, providing a great opportunity for Harry to launch himself at the man, tackling him to the ground.

Snape, it turned out, was quite a scratcher. He clawed at Harry, grasping for his neck, apparently, but Harry was much quicker. He dodged the talons and landed a punch first to Snape’s stomach then to his head. The man’s greasy hair bashed off the ground, along with

the rest of Snape's abnormally pointy head, quickly rendering him unconscious.

Harry leapt up from the man, trying to wipe the feeling of the grease off his hands. He hadn't sustained much damage, only a few scratches but Snape was looking slightly worse for the wear. He had a red mark on his face where Harry had hit him and it was surely to bruise. Moreover, it looked like the back of his head was bleeding slightly.

Footsteps alerted him to Malfoy's reappearance before the blonde spoke, in an awed voice. "Was that really necessary? I mean, this is going to be slightly hard for you to cover up."

"Really?" asked Harry sarcastically. "I would never have thought of that." He continued in a more casual tone, "It won't be that hard, actually. All that's really needed is a few spells to patch him up and a good memory charm."

"And you can do that?"

"... near enough. My memory charms aren't very... specific... so he'll probably find a chunk of his memory gone but other than that it should be fine."

As if to prove his point, he cast a few, basic, healing charms and then a couple of cleaning charms on the floor and Snape's person for good measure. He even tried to clean the grease off his hair – it was *such* an eyesore – but it was no good. It was almost as if Snape went out of his way to keep his hair that greasy. Finally, after a doubtful memory charm, all that remained was to wake him up.

"You know," said Harry, glancing at Malfoy. "I'd really appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone about this." He could do without the suspicion, at least until this Chamber business was cleared up.

"Sure," Malfoy agreed. "But how are we going to wake him up? He's still going to be pretty annoyed if the first thing he sees is Jeremy White's face."

"I think he'll wake up on his own, eventually," Harry said thoughtfully. "So if we knew a place to leave him he could wake up thinking he just fell asleep due to a little too much Christmas dinner."

"I know where his office is..." said Malfoy a little doubtfully. Harry shrugged.

"That'll do. Lead the way."

The two of them successfully managed to levitate Snape's unconscious body into his office, where they deposited him rather ungracefully in his chair. Well, he was bound to be a little confused but there was nothing they could do about that. After leaving the office, they bade their farewells and went their separate ways (but not until after Harry had removed his glamour charms). It would have been more than a little unfortunate if he had forgotten to remove them and had run into someone. Especially since he was unable to say his own damnable name.

A few corridors away from the entrance to Gryffindor, however, Harry froze at the sound of raised voices. There weren't many people left in the castle who could be shouting, which didn't comfort him at all. Slowly, carefully, he stuck his head round the corner ever so slightly. Within a fraction of a second, he had retracted it again in surprise. Round the corner, speaking very loudly, was Ron Weasley to Dumbledore.

"I swear, professor!" Ron exclaimed. "It was him, Jeremy White! He's back – here at Hogwarts, I mean, – and he's the one that's been opening the Chamber of Secrets! I heard him say so himself!"

How on earth had Ron found out about his conversation with Malfoy? Obviously, the Weasley had misinterpreted a few of the comments but he shouldn't have known that "Jeremy" was at Hogwarts at all. Unless... Harry frowned. Crabbe and Goyle had been acting rather oddly but he had assumed that they were in general very odd characters. Perhaps they weren't. Perhaps that *hadn't* been Crabbe and Goyle. When Crabbe had blushed, he had thought that the blush was merely creeping up passed his hair line but what if it had just been the affects of a spell or potion wearing off? No, that didn't seem too likely. They would have had no way to get into the Slytherin

common room and he doubted Weasley – and whoever his accomplice was – would have had the intelligence to distract the two Slytherin goons let alone impersonate them. It was far more likely that Crabbe and Goyle were just generally strange.

That still left the question of how Ron could have found out about his meeting in the Slytherin common room. Maybe he had seen him walking through the corridors and followed. Harry didn't know what spells or protections there were on the Slytherin common room to prevent eavesdroppers but there was a chance they weren't sufficient. He would have to inform Malfoy later about the possible lapse in privacy in Slytherin house.

On the other hand, it was possible that he had just been careless and Ron had seen him and Malfoy in the corridor and put two and two together, even if he had done so incorrectly.

Harry was distracted from his thoughts as Ron's wild accusations were cut off and Dumbledore spoke.

"I assure you, Mister Weasley," he said seriously. "That Jeremy White is gone from this school and is incapable of returning. Whatever you have seen or overheard has been done so in error. There must be some misunderstanding somewhere along the line."

"But professor!" cried Ron aghast. "I know it was him! Him and Malfoy! They're in it together, to get rid of all the muggleborns in the school. Besides, if it isn't White, who's been attacking the students since he's gone? He was the Heir of Slytherin and you saw the latest message! He won't be gone – not till he's finished what he set out to do! He –"

Dumbledore held up a hand and somehow this effectively silenced Ron. "It is simply not possible. Jeremy White cannot harm anyone within this school. He was simply a confused boy, unsure of who to believe but he is gone now. You would be surprised how much he has changed since his expulsion. Nevertheless," Dumbledore raised his voice slightly as Ron opened his mouth to protest. "I will speak to Mister Malfoy and hear his version of events. Now, I believe your brothers will be missing you in Gryffindor Tower."

Ron left after a quick, "Yes, sir," and headed off in the direction of Gryffindor Tower. Harry considered following him for a moment but decided that it was time already for another visit to Malfoy in the Slytherin common room. If Malfoy was unprepared for the oncoming interrogation, there was a good chance that he would be unable to lie convincingly. However, Harry knew that he had a good chance of talking to him before Dumbledore. The headmaster would want to think about Ron's accusations and try to figure out their meaning beforehand, surely.

It was not long before Harry found himself outside the Slytherin quarters again and, after a moment of thought, decided that his best option was to simply walk into the common room again and hope that no one else from the Slytherin house would be there and question him.

With a great sigh of relief, he saw that there was only Malfoy sitting alone reading a book. The blonde looked up with a great deal of surprise when he saw Harry.

"What are you doing here? You only left not long ago."

"Ron knows about our meeting and I think he overheard somehow." Well, there was no point in beating about the bush; fate would probably deem this an adequate time to awaken Snape and send him into the Slytherin common room for an inspection. "And he told Dumbledore who's going to come and talk to you about it."

Steadily, Malfoy's eyes rose slowly higher and higher. "How on earth did you find that out?"

"It's not important. Just have a good story ready for when Dumbledore comes. Are Crabbe and Goyle about? They can be your alibi."

"No, I've not seen them since they left to take Crabbe to the Hospital Wing."

"Were they acting oddly in any way?"

"You were there. They're normally quite slow on the uptake but they were quite thrown by you, I think. Why?"

"I was just wondering how Ron knew that I was here... Listen, I have to go; there's no telling when Snape's going to be up and about. Tell me if you find anything out, yeah?"

"Of course, but –"

But Harry was gone, already taken off out of the common room. He had been gone for some time from Gryffindor Tower and Ron was no doubt suspicious, though hopefully he would be too preoccupied with wondering what Jeremy was doing at Hogwarts to notice his prolonged absence.

Harry had just made it to the first upper floor of the school, however, when he heard approaching footsteps from ahead and had to backtrack to an alternative route. Unfortunately for him, he also heard hurrying footsteps from this route and quickly found himself stuck between the two. Without a second thought, Harry threw himself into a nearby alcove and drew the curtains of the window there around him, hoping that it would be enough to hide himself, though he was a little sceptical.

It was lucky that he *had* hidden himself, even if feebly, because a few seconds later both Dumbledore and Snape walked round opposite corners of the corridor to each other, both people Harry would *not* have wanted to encounter and that precise moment in time.

"Headmaster," said Snape before Dumbledore could open his mouth. There was a distinct hint of worry to his tone along with anger, making for an odd combination. "I have been drugged!"

"*What?*" asked Dumbledore, quite shocked. Whatever he had been expecting to hear, that certainly hadn't been it. Harry was sure that if he could see Dumbledore's face, his eyebrows would have disappeared into his hair.

"I have been assaulted and drugged," Snape repeated, sounding a little more sure of himself this time.

“Severus, what on earth are you talking about?”

“I awoke in my office, Headmaster, with a bruise forming on my hand and no recollection of where I have been all day.”

Harry cursed silently. How had he expected to catch each and every little injury that Snape had sustained? Better yet, how had Snape noticed the *one* mar on his skin that he *had* missed? The man spent entirely too much time analysing his hands, evidently.

“And you took this to mean you had been *drugged*, Severus? Surely you are jumping to conclusions somewhat. It is entirely possible that you have merely had a little too much to drink at the Christmas festivities. Your bruise could have come from anything.”

“Headmaster, you know I have had no large consumption of alcohol and I am not one to make a mountain out of a molehill.”

“Severus, that is not true and you know it. Every time you encounter Harry you seem to think he is on some personal vendetta to disrupt your life and if that is not making a mountain out of a molehill then I am not sure what is.”

“*Potter*,” snarled Snape. “*He* is the one behind this! I know he is. Somehow, *somehow*, he has drugged me and wiped my memory.”

“Don’t you think you are letting your grudge against him get a *little* far away from you now, Severus? The boy has been in Gryffindor Tower since the feast and I doubt even he would be able to do anything to you. You are, after all, an accomplished dueller yourself and never seem to let down your guard. If it had been him to attack you, or whatever it is you suspect, don’t you think you would have been more than capable of defeating him in a duel? I am quite certain that at the smallest hint of him you would have been prepared for an attack. I think you sometimes forget that he is only a second year and knows no spells of great consequence, Severus.”

“He knows enough,” Snape growled, apparently still thinking about Harry. Personally, Harry was slightly offended that Snape would jump to the immediate assumption that he was behind his misfortune but at the same time he was slightly pleased of the fact that he was capable

of making such an impact on the bat of a man's life. "Did you say he was in Gryffindor Tower? I'll go ask him personally, then."

"You will do no such thing," warned Dumbledore, his tone suddenly very stern indeed. "You are as likely to attack the boy yourself as ask him a question. *He is not James*, Severus. Surely it is time to let old grudges lie in peace? Your old foe is dead and taking it out on Harry will do nothing. I suggest that you leave the past behind you where it belongs."

"It is not a memory that I am concerned about, Headmaster. The boy is a no good brat and has no respect whatsoever for rules or his elders. He refuses to listen to reason. Even you must have realised that he has gone behind your back and continued to attack students despite your express wish that he stop. The boy should not be allowed into the school."

"That is quite enough, Severus." And by Dumbledore's voice, it certainly sounded like this would be the last of many similar conversations. "I am not quite certain of what it is that you think he has done this time but I believe he has done nothing wrong. I am... unsure... whether he attacked Mrs Norris but I have had sufficient evidence to suggest that there is no reason why he should be attacking the students now. As to your – drugging was it? Well, I highly doubt that he is capable of accomplishing such a feat. Now, I strongly suggest that you go lie down for a couple of hours. Who knows, you may have simply fallen asleep and dreamt the whole thing. Good day, Severus."

The sound of footsteps walking off and fading into the distance convinced Harry that Dumbledore had left but Snape's footsteps had yet to sound.

"It is not the memory that concerns me," murmured Snape to himself. "It is the lack thereof."

Snape's footsteps took their cue and began their walk away from the alcove where Harry was still hiding. He did not immediately leave his hiding place, choosing rather to stay there and consider what had occurred just outside his curtain shield. Strangely enough, the thought that struck him most was that he was very fortunate to have

managed to overhear two potentially important conversations in one day. He might not have received many presents, but Harry felt that it had been quite a good Christmas after all.

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When he did eventually make it back to the Gryffindor common room without incident, Harry was immediately confronted by Ron, the only occupant of the room. The boy was in quite a state. Harry listened with feigned patience as he ranted to him about all that he had told Dumbledore and the fact that the headmaster had not listened. Seeing an opportunity for yet more information, he immediately asked Ron how it was that he had found out about Jeremy being in school in the first place.

"Well, Neville – he's in the dormitory just now – and me thought that Malfoy might be the Heir of Slytherin," Ron said, quite unabashedly. "So we told Hermione about it and she came up with the idea of using Polyjuice Potion to look like Crabbe and Goyle. She was going to come with us but something went wrong so she's in the Hospital Wing now. I'd have invited you but I know you don't get on well with Hermione."

"I didn't know *you* did," was all that Harry could think of to say. So Crabbe and Goyle *hadn't* been real. Well, it was quite impressive that Ron and Neville hadn't managed to botch up their plans badly.

"Well, I didn't really," admitted Ron. "But me and Neville wouldn't have been able to pull it off without her. She's okay once you get to know her, that Hermione."

"I'm sure... You know," Harry said suddenly. He had been hit with a burst of inspiration. "If Dumbledore doesn't take you seriously, why do you bother going to him? It's not as if he's going to change his mind. Around here, his word is law."

"If I was Dumbledore, I probably wouldn't take me seriously either." Ron shrugged. "Besides, Dumbledore knows what he's doing, doesn't he? I mean, look at all the stuff he's done. There's a reason he's the greatest wizard in the world."

“My my, isn’t he flattering? And he doesn’t even need the old fool around to kiss up. Charming.”

Harry resisted letting out a snort of laughter. He agreed wholeheartedly with Sir but his blatant lack of enthusiasm for the headmaster was somewhat amusing when there was chief minion number one sitting across from him.

“Well, I’m sure he’ll remain so *good* and *noble* for you,” said Harry with false cheer. “I mean, it’s not as if he’d ever do anything to let down the fans, is it?”

He left to go to the dormitory, unable to stand the sight of Ron any longer, leaving a very confused red head behind him.

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Time seemed to pass incredibly quickly after that. It was not long before the rest of the school returned from their many cheerful holiday festivities. The only thing even slightly notable about it was Harry’s progress on that day in Occlumency. Sir decided that it was finally time for him to do something other than try to organise his thoughts, which he had quickly become bored of but persisted with. Unfortunately, it turned out that this next step wasn’t any more favourable.

Apparently, this blankness, this clearness, that he had been working towards was supposed to be enough to keep out an invading mind. Sir would attack his mind with legilimency and Harry was to attempt to keep him out. It was not altogether clear to Harry how this worked. After all, didn’t Sir reside *within* his mind rather than without? Obviously that couldn’t be the case as it would mean that Sir, from the inside, would have to attack from the outside. Somehow it was done, however, and Harry did not enjoy it at all.

The first time Sir tested his feeble barriers, Harry had witnessed his own memory of falling off the tall building with Mir, amongst flashes of other memories. The second, he had seen himself flying away from the first bludger that had taken a liking to him. The third, he had relived the werewolf’s attack. The fourth, he had watched Aunt Petunia die.

By the end of this first lesson, Harry was more than a little motivated to work hard at occlumency and to learn as many spells as he could. The sooner he was good at these things, the sooner he could get rid of Dumbledore once and for all and remove the source of his problems.

Over the next few months, he became better at occlumency, even to the point where Sir said that his defences were adequate to prevent Dumbledore seeing his thoughts unless under a direct attack. He found himself spending more time with Malfoy and Nymph too, though never when anyone else was around. So far, he had managed to build up quite a convincing image of himself as Harry Potter, saviour extraordinaire. Consequently, he met them both in secret (though seldom together) and he even found himself liking the blonde, rather than just tolerating him. He was interesting, to say the least, and unlike Ron, he didn't annoy him to no end.

Only a few notable events occurred between Christmas and the upcoming summer months. One such event was the fact that Harry, with the assistance of both Malfoy and Nymph, decided that the school had fallen into too dull a routine and a false sense of security. Consequently, there was another "attack" on the school similar to the one Harry had organised before. This time, however, instead of using a potion to create the appearance of thousands of snakes, they actually used thousands of snakes. It took a considerable amount of time to conjure them all but Satheldin helped considerably by going into the forest and bringing all those he could find back with him. It had certainly been very amusing to watch the teachers attempt to deal with the onslaught.

Malfoy never did find out any other information on the Chamber of Secrets. Dobby the house-elf had been sacked by his father for some reason, though. The only thing Harry could think of that would warrant this was the fact that the elf had gone against Lucius Malfoy's orders and left the house. Or it could be that the elf had almost unveiled his plans or a plot of some kind but Harry wasn't very sure.

Despite this lack of information, he was rather curious as to where the entrance to the Chamber was. It wouldn't hurt to know; he would know what area to avoid in case the basilisk emerged. Obviously, he

couldn't ask anyone who had been there the last time for clues; the only available person would be Dumbledore and there wasn't a chance in hell that Harry was going to ask him. Instead, after much thought on the matter, Harry ended up asking the ghosts, who might have seen something that no one else would. Apparently the Chamber was a sensitive subject with the ghosts, however, and most was unwilling to even mention the monster. Eventually, the Fat Friar informed him that Moaning Myrtle had died from the monster, which led him to her bathroom to ask her. It was this that led him to the discovery that the entrance to the Chamber was most likely behind a sink in her bathroom, though he never shared this theory with anyone or attempted to visit the Chamber. There was no way he was going to kill himself with a basilisk.

Valentines Day wasn't an entirely enjoyable affair. Lockhart had arranged for the Great Hall to be decorated in bright pink colours that made Nymph wince and immediately have to leave. That was only the beginning of it too. It turned out that he had hired card carrying "cupids" to send out valentines cards to pupils but whenever one of the dwarves came anywhere near Harry, whether it was to deliver him a message or not (he never really found out), he amused himself greatly by creating new ways to get rid of the nuisance. His methods ranged greatly from hanging them on chandeliers with gags in their mouths to turning their heads to plant pots. By the end of the day, he was as irritated with the holiday as everyone else.

With the impending summer came another Quidditch match, unfortunately. Quidditch practises with the Gryffindor team were becoming unendurable. Not only was Wood constantly trying to work them harder and harder, but Fred and George were always pestering him and trying to amuse him. It was perhaps the most annoying thing Harry had ever had to put up with. Eventually, he had snatched one of the beaters' bats off them and whacked a bludger in their direction. Sometimes he had to wonder whether convincing the teachers that he could do no wrong was worth the suffering but he only had to remind himself that, as long as he stayed in Dumbledore's confidence, it would be easier to finally get his revenge to renew his determination not to kill one of them.

The day of the match, he did not wake up at his usual early time in the morning, which confused him rather. Instead, he woke up with barely enough time to grab a piece of toast before heading morbidly onto the pitch with the rest of the team. They were just about to kick off the ground (the opposite Hufflepuff team doing likewise) however, when McGonagall came half-marching, half-running across the pitch carrying an enormous purple megaphone. Through it she cancelled the match, to Harry's delight but Wood's dismay.

He soon found out a possible reason for why he had awoken much later than usual. It turned out that Hermione and fifth year Ravenclaw had been petrified. He felt rather indifferent to their situation – they shouldn't have been looking at basilisks anyway – but he couldn't help wonder if he hadn't overslept. For once in his life, he really wished he'd dreamed of something while he was asleep, even if it was a nightmare.

From then on, new safety precautions were put in place, not that Harry paid much attention to them. Students were to return to their common rooms earlier, were to be escorted from class to class by teachers, were not allowed to go to a bathroom without a teacher and all Quidditch matches, training and evening activities were postponed.

The next day, both Dumbledore and Hagrid were removed from the school. Harry was unsure how he felt towards Dumbledore's eviction – he didn't care about Hagrid, having never properly spoken to him. Originally, he had been overjoyed that Dumbledore had left the school – it meant that he wouldn't have to put up with him on an almost daily basis – but upon further reflection, it would make it much harder for him to get back at the headmaster, especially if he was removed permanently. He only hoped that Dumbledore was suffering wherever he had gone.

Things calmed down significantly after that. Well, for a while.

It was a History of Magic class to bore students to death. To be fair, all History of Magic classes were dull enough to bore students to death but this one seemed especially tiresome. Harry wasn't even trying to pay attention, something that he normally at least *attempted*. He was getting frustrated with the new "safety precautions" and it was affecting his temperament for doing schoolwork. He wasn't the only one either. In the chair directly in front of him, he could see Ron stabbing irritably on his parchment with his quill, which soon broke from the pressure causing Ron to fling it across the classroom. Unfortunately for Harry, things soon got a lot more interesting, but not in the way he had been hoping.

"All students are to return to their house dormitories at once. All teachers return to the staff room. Immediately, please," McGonagall's voice magically magnified itself so it was heard throughout the school.

Instantly, the whole room leaped up into a frenzy. Pupils hurriedly stashed away books, parchment and quills and raced out the door. Apparently, most naturally assumed that the monster from the Chamber of Secrets had gotten loose and was roaming about the school. Similarly, Harry believed that the Chamber had to be somehow involved but he was too deep in thought to panic. At a much slower pace, he made his way up to the Gryffindor common room.

If the students were being shepherded towards their houses because of some disaster involving the Chamber of Secrets, then Harry couldn't help but think that he definitely wasn't the one responsible for its opening in the first place. He had no blackout recently and he was sure of where he had been all day. It felt like some great weight had been lifted from his mind. This meant that he wasn't losing his sanity and he wasn't attacking pupils without realising it. Well, he wasn't losing his memory, at least. His sanity, what with the various voices and figures he had seen that no one else could, was another matter.

The common room was buzzing with murmurs and speculative chatter when at last Harry entered. Ron waved him over and, rolling

his eyes, Harry obliged. If nothing else, Ron could entertain him whilst they were waiting for news.

He didn't have to wait long, however. No sooner had Harry reached Ron than the portrait hole opened again and McGonagall walked through, looking abnormally sober.

"I have terrible news," she said, as soon as the chatter had died away at her entrance. "A student has been taken by the monster into the Chamber itself. Hogwarts will be closing. Headmaster Dumbledore and the other teachers have always said that as soon as a student was fatally injured, Hogwarts would close, for good. The Hogwarts Express will take you home first thing in the morning."

Questions immediately bombarded the professor, not that Harry felt much sympathy for her. If she was going to give a substandard explanation, it was to be expected.

"How do you know?"

"Who was taken?"

"Where's Professor Dumbledore?"

"Enough!" barked McGonagall, effectively cutting off the tirade. "The heir of Slytherin has left another message, right under the first. *"Her skeleton will lie in the Chamber for ever."* It is a grave situation and no one is to go outside their dormitories."

Harry frowned. It hadn't been him; he was sure of it. Even with his strange memory losses, he was sure he hadn't lured a girl into the Chamber... wasn't he? His mind was drawn back to what McGonagall had said first. *"A student has been taken by the monster."* Maybe the heir of Slytherin hadn't commanded his monster to take the girl. Maybe the basilisk was no longer under control. Maybe it was acting of its own accord. Things had suddenly gotten a lot more worrisome.

"Who was taken, professor?" asked a white-faced Ron, after locating his own sister and hugging her fiercely. "Who did the monster get?"

"A Slytherin first year," replied McGonagall. The room seemed to relax a little. How caring of the Gryffindors, Harry thought disdainfully. As soon as they knew it wasn't one of their own and only a lowly Slytherin, they didn't care. "By the name of Denebola Lestrangle. Now, I suggest you all pack your trunks."

McGonagall left the room but Harry barely noticed. He hadn't even heard her after Nymph's name. *Nymph* had been taken. *Nymph's* skeleton would lie in the Chamber forever. *Nymph* was in the grips of a basilisk that he, Harry, might or might not have released upon the school. He'd be damned if he was going to let her.

Before the thought had even registered in his mind, Harry had picked himself up off the floor where he had collapsed in shock. Ron was staring at him and continued to stare at him as he strode purposefully towards the portrait hole.

"Where are you going?" demanded Ron, catching up with him at the exit.

Harry stopped to look at him incredulously. Where did he *think* he was going? "To save Nymph!"

Now it was Ron's turn to look at him incredulously. "Why? You can't do anything – *Dumbledore* couldn't even do anything! Besides, why do you care so much? She's just some Slytherin girl."

Glaring, Harry spat, "*Dumbledore* is a senile old buffoon and that *Slytherin girl* is my *friend*!"

Ron blinked. "No she's not. Lestrangle wasn't friends with anyone. Only Malfoy and Jeremy White but he was gone before you came."

Harry laughed maniacally, still standing in the entranceway, oblivious to the fact that nearly the whole common room was listening to them. "You *fool*," he barely managed to snarl through his anger. His fists clenched, Harry barely restrained himself from hitting Ron. There wasn't time to get into a fight. Nymph needed him. The air seemed to crackle with his suppressed rage and it felt like some unseen restraint was lifted from him.

"I *am* Jeremy White!"

Harry wasted not a second more and turned and ran in the direction of Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, leaving a silent common room behind him. He didn't even pause to think about how Dumbledore's spell preventing him from mentioning his previous name. It wasn't important. Not now. Not now Nymph was in the grips of a basilisk and possibly the heir of Slytherin.

He reached the bathroom in record time. He met no teachers on the way. He saw no ghosts. There was no one outside the safety of the dormitories. No one but him and Nymph.

Ignoring Myrtle's questioning and inquisitive stare, Harry marched over to the tap where he knew there was an engraving of a snake. He frowned at it for a moment before trying to say something in parseltongue. Nothing happened. Evidently, he had spoken in English.

"*What are you doing?*" hissed Satheldin, his head protruding from Harry's sleeve. Harry allowed himself a grin despite the dire situation. He had forgotten Satheldin was there but he would certainly help him speak parseltongue. Harry would thank Malfoy later.

"*Open up,*" he hissed at the tap, keeping Satheldin firmly in the corner of his eye.

At once, the tap glowed with a brilliant white light and began to spin. Next second, the sink began to move. The sink, in fact, sank right out of sight, leaving a large pipe exposed, a pipe wide enough for a man to slide into.

Without thinking, Harry jumped into the hole. It felt rather like rushing down and endless, slimy, dark slide. He could barely see but in the dim light he could make out other pipes branching off in other directions. None of them compared to the one he was travelling through in width or, he was certain, twists. None of them could possibly turn as many times as this one did. If the angle of the pipe was any steeper, Harry was certain he would be falling without any contact. It seemed to go on for an eternity – far too long in Harry's opinion, especially when Nymph was in danger below.

At last, the pipe levelled out and Harry shot out the end of it with a wet thud. He lit his wand soundlessly, hoping to go without notice until he could be sure the basilisk was no where nearby, but he gave up on this hope as soon as he took a step. Amongst the slime that covered the tunnel were bones, lots of them. They looked like rat bones. If Harry hadn't been sure before, he was now convinced that the basilisk had had plenty to eat during its years of isolation.

Listening, Harry hoped, would be enough to alert him to a basilisk moving nearby. If it wasn't, he was, well, screwed. A basilisk would be huge, however, and there was no way it could move amongst all the bones that littered the ground without moving one of them and making a sound. He met no such snake, however, and his only company was the comforting presence of Satheldin on his arm. In fact, the biggest surprise he received was the sight of a twenty foot long snakeskin that had obviously been shed. Harry hoped it had been shed recently; at least that way the basilisk wouldn't be too large but he doubted it. Centuries of growth would certainly not leave the snake that small.

Time crept on and Harry began to grow more and more worried that he would not reach Nymph in time but finally he reached a solid wall. Two entwined serpents were carved on it, their eyes set with great, glinting emeralds. He did not need Satheldin's help to open this door.

As the door opened, Harry found himself standing at the end of a gigantic chamber. He paid no attention to the towering stone pillars entwined with yet more carved serpents nor the high statue of an ancient wizard. What did Slytherin's pointless decorations matter now? Nymph had to be somewhere nearby.

Carefully, wand casting a glow around him, Harry moved in between the pillars until, at last, he saw her. Nymph was lying, quite still, in between the giant statue's feet. She was hardly breathing.

Running over to her, Harry collapsed beside her, dropped his wand to free his hand and proceeded to shake her frantically. "Nymph! *Nymph!* Wake up! Come on, Nymph! Get your ass in gear and let's go!"

"I've been waiting for you, Harry Potter."

Harry whipped around but did not move away from Nymph. A tall, black-haired boy was leaning against the nearest pillar, watching him. Strangely enough, he didn't seem quite... *there*. He was blurred around the edges as if he was a drawing that a small child had tried to rub out.

"Can I help you?" Harry asked the boy sarcastically. What was this fool wasting his time for? He had to get Nymph to wake up!

"Yes, you can," the boy replied, obviously not picking up on Harry's hostility. "I want to know, how is it that a baby with no extraordinary magical talent managed to defeat the greatest wizard of all time?"

He let out a derisive snort. "Who *are* you? No, wait, I don't *care*. Now, you can go to hell while I get my friend out of here." He turned back to Nymph.

"She won't wake."

"Oh, because you're so *knowledgeable*. How would you know?" he asked rhetorically. Nymph was cold to the touch – how long had she been down here?

"Well, you see, Harry Potter," the boy began, obviously intending on making a story out of it. He only half listened to him; Nymph was by far more important. "Your little friend here has been confiding in me all year, pouring her soul out to me, if you will. And it just so happens, her soul was exactly what I wanted."

Slowly, Harry turned round to face him. "What're you blabbering about?"

"My diary," said the boy carefully, as if Harry would not understand him otherwise. He pointed at a small, black book. "I am a memory, preserved for fifty years in a diary. If you were to write in it, like Nymph here, then I can write back. Ingenious, is it not?"

"No," Harry interrupted before he could go on. "Why the hell would you want to be stuck in a diary of a twelve year old girl?"

"Yes it did get rather tiresome," he agreed. "But as Nymph continued to write to me, pouring her heart and soul into me, I began to pour a bit of my soul back into *her*."

"You," Harry said pointedly. "Are a weirdo." Suddenly he noticed that the other boy had his wand but he said nothing. He was perfectly capable of defending himself against a *memory*.

"Haven't you figured it out yet?" burst the boy impatiently. "*I* am the heir of Slytherin! *I* made Nymph open the Chamber of Secrets. *I* made her strangle school roosters and daub threatening messages on the walls. *I* made her set the serpent of Slytherin on Mudbloods and the Squib's cat."

"Thank god," Harry could not help but breath. The boy looked at him oddly and for some reason Harry felt the need to explain. "I was getting kind of worried that I was the one doing it."

"Why would *you* be the heir of Slytherin?"

"No reason," Harry replied evasively.

"You know, I have been waiting to meet you for some time. Nymph has told me all about your *fascinating* little history and I must say, you're not at all what I expected."

"What d'you mean?" Harry asked sharply. He was hoping the boy would reveal a way to destroy him and give Nymph back her strength.

"I imagined you to be much more... *self-righteous*. I never pictured you to be friends with the likes of little Nymph over there."

"Why not?" he demanded. Everyone seemed to be saying that and for the life of him he couldn't understand why.

"No reason," the boy mimicked his earlier comment. "There are many similarities between us. Both half-bloods, orphans, raised by muggles. Probably the only two parselmouths to come to Hogwarts since Salazar Slytherin himself. We even *look* something alike..."

“That’s nice,” Harry said condescendingly. This boy really was an odd one.

Harry’s mind was working in overdrive. So this boy, this *memory*, had made Nymph set the basilisk on the students. That meant he was a parselmouth too. Well, at least he wasn’t the only one. It all made sense, in a way. So this boy was the heir of Slytherin and hated muggleborns but why make Nymph sign her own death and enter the Chamber of Secrets? Surely he would have known it would mean the closure of Hogwarts, the leaving of easy muggleborns to kill.

“So what’d you make Nymph come down here for?”

“For some time, Harry Potter, I have become disinterested in muggleborns. My new target has been to meet *you*. Nymph put too much of herself into the diary, into me. Enough to let me leave its pages at last. I’ve been waiting for you to appear, you see. I knew you wouldn’t leave her to die.”

“Who are you again?” Yes, the boy was definitely crazy.

The memory smirked and began to trace Harry’s wand through the air, writing three shimmering words.

TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE

“My name,” he said. “Tom Riddle after my filthy muggle father, Marvolo after my grandfather.” Then he waved the wand and the letters began to rearrange themselves.

I AM LORD VOLDEMORT

Riddle said nothing, apparently waiting for Harry’s reaction. He wasn’t sure what he was supposed to do. Sure it was a nice anagram but it was still really weird. Was he supposed to applaud the rearrangement of a few letters?

“Good for you?” he tried. Riddle frowned.

“Don’t you know who I am?”

With a snort of derisive laughter, Harry said, “No. Why? Should I?”

“Yes!” Harry jumped slightly. Riddle seemed to be quite offended that he had no idea who he was. “I am the greatest wizard of all time! I am Slytherin’s only heir! I am the wizard who will change the world for the better!”

“I got nothing,” commented Harry mildly. Riddle growled.

“I am Lord Voldemort, the Dark Lord! I am the one who murdered your parents! I am the one that you, a mere infant, somehow defeated! Do you know who I am now, *Harry Potter!*”

“You what?” Harry blinked at him, not registering what Riddle was saying.

“I,” hissed Riddle. “Am the Dark Lord, Voldemort! I *killed* your Mudblood mother and do you know what? She died *begging* for mercy! But I won’t hold that against you – you can’t choose your family.”

“So let me get this right,” Harry said slowly. “*You’re* the one that killed my parents, forcing me to live with my aunt who then got killed protecting me from Dumbledore. Because my aunt got killed, I had to live on the streets with other people who got killed for knowing me. *You’re* the reason my life’s a living *hell?*”

“No, Harry,” Riddle said carefully. “*I* am the one who released you from Dumbledore’s grasp. If you’d grown up with your parents you’d have been Dumbledore’s pawn and we both know how much you’d have liked that. No, I am the one who set you *free.*”

“Actually,” said Harry sweetly. “At the moment *you* are the one sucking the life out of *my* friend, so I’m afraid I’m going to have to kill you.”

“Now, now, Harry, not so hasty. We could be great together; all I ask is that you tell me how you survived as a baby.”

Harry frowned, thinking deeply. He didn’t care how he survived but he was using the time it bought him to try and find a way to defeat Riddle.

Riddle would be faster in a duel; he had his wand while Harry only had his wooden arm. How *had* he defeated Riddle as a baby? For some reason Voldemort didn't seem to be the appropriate name for him, even as an adult.

Aunt Petunia had told him how he had survived; Harry was sure she had. If only he could remember... Yes, he remembered. Aunt Petunia had told him that Dumbledore wanted him to think that it had been his mother's sacrifice that saved him. In fact, she had told him, it hadn't been so; he had just deflected the Dark Lord's curse on his own and sent one of his own back in return. Well, if Dumbledore had a story that he wanted him, Harry, to know, then there could be no harm in Riddle knowing the same story.

"My mother died to save me. Her sacrifice protected me."

"Ah," sighed Riddle. Harry was unsure whether Riddle was talking to him or himself. "Of *course*! That's a powerful counter-charm but no matter; it was only by a lucky chance that you survived that night, nothing more. That's all I really wanted to know, so I'll ask you once more; will you join me? We really would be a great team, unstoppable. We could get even with Dumbledore, that's what you want, isn't it? So what do you say?"

Harry paused but only for the briefest instant. "Not if you're going to kill Nymph so that you can survive. There's no way I'm going to stand back and let my friend die."

"Harry," sighed Riddle in exasperation. "Don't you understand? You don't *need* friends; they only get in the way! Friends will only turn around and betray you in the end. No one can be trusted. Tell you what, I'll let you have Dumbledore all to yourself; I won't interfere. No? *Really*? So you're telling me, you won't join with me to make the most invincible team the world has ever seen to save the life of your *friend*? You'd have made one hell of a Hufflepuff."

Harry said nothing throughout this.

"Well, I'm afraid that *I* will have to kill *you* then. I can't have you running to tell the world that I've killed a girl and come back into existence. I –"

Riddle cut off as the wand went flying out of his hand into Harry's outstretched one. He smirked; he had summoned it both wandlessly and silently. That was bound to throw Riddle off a bit.

To his surprise, the wand then flew out of his hand and back into Riddle's. Apparently Riddle was just as skilled at wandless, nonverbal magic as he was. Well, two could play at that game. He re-summoned the wand. Riddle re-summoned it back. They spent five whole minutes just tossing the wand between them like it was some game. Eventually Riddle broke the cycle and let Harry have it.

"We are getting nowhere," he said. "Now, Harry Potter, I will show you the powers of Lord Voldemort, heir of Salazar Slytherin."

He turned to face the stone head of Salazar Slytherin between the pillars and Harry did likewise, certain that he knew what was coming, mind reeling trying to figure out a way to defend himself.

"Speak to me, Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts Four," hissed Riddle, quite clearly in parseltongue, but Harry understood him.

The mouth of Slytherin's face opened and Harry snapped his eyes shut after scooping up Riddle's diary unnoticed. He was pretty certain it would be useful for something. He backed away as he heard something stirring in Slytherin's mouth, still trying desperately to find out a way to defeat the basilisk that was uncoiling itself. He needed a weapon of some sorts. There was a dagger hidden in his boot but Harry doubted it would be of much use against a *basilisk*. What could harm a basilisk? That was the real question. If he could get something that would harm it, his chances were significantly greater. Well, he could lop off its head but that would be rather difficult. He'd need the axe of doom to manage it. No, that wouldn't do at all.

Something fell to the stone floor of the dark Chamber. Harry didn't need to open his eyes to know what it was. The basilisk was out of Slytherin's mouth. In desperation now, Harry searched his memory for anything he knew about basilisks even as Riddle hissed, *"Kill him."*

Wheeling around, Harry took off at a run, simultaneously stashing the diary up his sleeve so that it would not fall out and Riddle could claim it. He was only running so that he could open his eyes, knowing that

he wasn't even remotely facing the basilisk, and so that he had a few seconds more to think.

Spiders flee before the basilisk – no, that wasn't even remotely helpful. Of course! *The Basilisk flees only from the crowing of the rooster, which is fatal to it.* All he needed now was a rooster... but Hagrid had said someone had been killing all the school roosters at Christmas, hadn't he? Well, there was no chance of him summoning one then.

He raced out of the chamber down a side pipe and continued taking every turn he could. Somewhere behind him the basilisk was coming. If he was extremely lucky, thought Harry, the basilisk would get tangled up with all the turns, but he doubted it.

Coming to a halt, trying not to breath too loudly so that the basilisk could not find him by ear at least, Harry searched the ground. His plan wasn't foolproof, he wasn't even sure it would work, but it was the only one he had. Quickly, he snatched up a rat skeleton from the ground and held it outstretched in his left hand.

The basilisk hissed a few pipes away. Lucky for him, he was a fast runner and had bought a little time. Unluckily for him, he hadn't a clue how he was going to achieve his only for of defence.

Mind blank, Harry settled for pointing his wand at the skeleton, channelling some magic and willing it to do what he wanted. Remarkably, it did. It was slow and the basilisk was only a pipe away, he was sure, still sniffing out his scent, but it worked. The skeleton he held turned slowly into a living, breathing rooster. And then it squawked indignantly letting the king of serpents know exactly where they were.

Swearing loudly as the snake began moving at a much quicker pace and Riddle started hissing furiously at it, Harry took off at a run again, still thinking quickly. He had a rooster. The rooster's crow was fatal to the snake. Now, how the hell did he make it crow?

"*You, boy, are a fool,*" remarked Sir, as Harry skidded back into the main Chamber, where Nymph was still residing. He did not stop running, not even to listen to Sir. The basilisk was *very* close on his

tail and it entered the Chamber, Riddle running after it, only a few seconds after him. *"You are aware roosters crow at dawn?"*

Oh! Now he felt like an idiot. Of course! Still running, basilisk two paces behind him, Harry conjured the image of a sun rising over the horizon for the rooster to see, which he was still holding.

Thankfully, the rooster crowed.

Unthankfully, the basilisk still reached him and even as it began to shriek in pain and agony, it lunged towards him, sinking its fang into his arm.

Harry collapsed under it. The basilisk died almost instantly on top of him. The rooster ran around and attempted to escape like a headless chicken. Riddle laughed triumphantly.

Breathing heavily, Harry tried to heave the basilisk's great head off him. Suddenly, he was feeling very tired. With great difficulty, he managed to remove the head from on top of him but the fang stayed lodged, firmly speared through his right arm and out the other side.

"What? But that's impossible!" cried Riddle, in astonishment. "How are you not dead?"

It was Harry's turn to laugh now, even if he was a bit too exhausted to do it justice. He rolled up his sleeve, removing the diary as he did so, and displayed to Riddle his wooden arm.

"There's no blood pumping there," he called to the other boy, still smiling wearily. "But there's plenty of ink in *this*." He held up the diary, finally having sussed out how to defeat the young, dark lord.

"No!" Riddle cried, even as Harry took the diary in his left hand and speared it through the fang protruding from his right arm.

Ink flooded out of the diary and Riddle twisted and writhed in pain. Harry watched him emotionlessly. All he cared about was that Nymph would be alright. Suddenly, Riddle was gone.

Harry pocketed his wand and removed the diary from the fang, where it was speared rather like a kebab. He then tried to remove the fang from his arm but it was stuck firmly in place. Just as he was about to try using his wand in his left hand, there was a faint moan from the end of the Chamber, bringing Harry's attention sharply away from his arm and over to Nymph, who was sitting up.

He was there in an instant, helping her up, fang forgotten and still holding the diary.

"Wh – what happened?" she asked in confusion.

"It's okay," said Harry, smiling in relief that she appeared unharmed. "Riddle's gone, and the basilisk's dead."

"Huh?"

"I came down here," he explained, gesturing towards the rest of the Chamber, where the basilisk still lay, now covered in ink. The rooster was still running around, making quite a ruckus. "Riddle was going to kill you and like hell was I gonna sit back in Gryffindor Tower and let you die."

Nymph still looked confused for a moment but then she smiled at him. "Thanks Harry. I didn't know you was so sweet."

"Come on," he said. "We've got to get out of here." Not knowing what else to do, he pocketed the diary too and began to lead Nymph out and over the dead basilisk – which really was some length – when she screamed.

"Harry! There's a *fang* in your arm!"

He laughed. "You forget things too easily."

He showed her the wood in his arm and they continued out of the Chamber, wading through the bones and slime, without further incident until they reached the pipe Harry had slid down. There they stopped, Harry frowning up it, Nymph leaning tiredly on his shoulder, perfectly happy to let him figure out a solution to their newest problem. Unfortunately, he was quite out of ideas, being quite exhausted

himself. The only solution that came to mind was to climb out but he wasn't sure how effective that would be. Suddenly it hit him that pipes normally transported water so, theoretically, he could blast him and Nymph out with a strong enough jet. Well, it was worth a try.

It turned out that it worked. Well, near enough. They both got very wet during the process and more than a little bruised when they were sent sailing out of the sink at the other end. Come to think of it, the bathroom wasn't looking all too good afterwards either. Perhaps there had been a better way to get out of the Chamber of Secrets but Harry was too tired to care or to attempt to think of it. Moaning Myrtle wasn't too pleased with his return either but he suspected that was because he wasn't dead and prepared to spend eternity with her.

"So, what we going to do now?" asked Nymph once they had left the bathroom.

"We go to McGonagall."

"*What?* Why?"

"Because as long as she thinks you're dead, the school's going to close."

"Is that really such a bad thing? I mean, it's not like you was thrilled with the place before."

"Nymph," Harry stopped walking and turned to look at her seriously. She would treat whatever he said as a joke otherwise. "If Hogwarts closes, Dumbledore will want to train me himself and I'll be stuck with him forever. At least here I don't have to see him that often. Besides," he turned to continue walking. "The library is very useful and hopefully it won't be too long before Dumbledore leaves for good."

"What'd you mean by that?"

Harry did not answer. They had reached McGonagall's door now and he didn't really think it was an appropriate conversation to be having when they saw her. Steeling himself, he knocked and pushed open the door.

“What are you doing here?” Harry blurted out in surprise once the door had swung open. Inside, McGonagall was not alone. Dumbledore was sitting next to her, looking very grave until he caught sight of Harry and Nymph which reignited that irksome twinkle in his eyes. Hastily, Harry fortified his occlumency shields.

“I was contacted by the governors today,” said Dumbledore mildly. “It was like being caught in a hailstorm of owls, to tell the truth. They’d heard that Miss Lestrangle had been killed and wanted me back here at once. They seemed to think that I was the best man for the job after all. But what Professor McGonagall and myself are curious about would seem far more important. How is it that Miss Lestrangle and yourself are *not* dead?”

Harry was barely restraining himself from glaring – it wouldn’t have looked to good for his “reformed” attitude – and seriously considered not answering at all but Nymph gave him a nudge and seemed to shrink behind him slightly, which was rather odd considering her normally outgoing personality. Obviously, she wanted *him* to tell Dumbledore.

“Well,” started Harry, fumbling for words. “When McGonagall –”

“*Professor* McGonagall,” corrected Dumbledore.

“Yes, yes,” he replied absentmindedly. “Anyways, when *Professor* McGonagall told us that Nymph had been taken into the Chamber, I wasn’t about to sit back and let her die, was I? So I followed Nymph into the Chamber, defeated the monster and the heir of Slytherin and brought her here.”

“Wait a minute, Potter,” McGonagall said, quite flabbergasted. “How did you know where the Chamber was and how did you defeat the monster? And *who* –”

“I think,” interrupted Dumbledore calmly. “Professor McGonagall is asking for you to give us a little more detail.”

Harry sighed. “Fine. I figured out what the monster was at the beginning of the year when you blamed me for the attack on Filch’s cat. I’m surprised you still haven’t worked it out; it’s pathetically

simple. It's a basilisk. I found out where the Chamber was earlier in the year too. I just asked all the ghosts because I figured they'd know something about it since the Chamber was opened fifty years ago. When I asked Moaning Myrtle she said that she'd died from a pair of eyes near the sink so I checked there and there was a snake carved into the tap. From there it was only the case of telling it to open in parseltongue.

"So anyways, I followed Nymph into the Chamber and there was Tom Riddle, standing over Nymph – she was lying unconscious on the floor. I'm sure you remember *him*, Professor Dumbledore," Harry said sweetly.

"Riddle was there?" asked Dumbledore sharply.

"Oh yes," continued Harry calmly, enjoying the panicked expression on Dumbledore's face. "He was a sixteen year old memory and we had a nice little chat together. He told me lots of... *interesting...* things." Of course, nothing of the sort had happened but it was worth telling this little lie to see the look of dread on Dumbledore's face. Obviously the old man thought that he had been further corrupted by a *memory*. "It turns out we share a lot of the same opinions."

"Harry," said Dumbledore quickly before he could go on. "I assure you that whatever Riddle told you, it was most likely lies to convince you to join him."

He nodded expressionlessly in reply to this. "Well, I wasn't going to let Nymph die so Riddle called the basilisk on me. I knew that the cry of a rooster was fatal to basilisks so I transfigured a rooster but it wouldn't crow. Then S-" Harry cut himself off abruptly. He had been about to say that Sir had told him how to make the rooster crow. Hurriedly, he carried on, hoping that no one had noticed his slip. "I mean, so then I conjured the image of a sun rising to make it crow and it did and the basilisk died."

"But how did Riddle get there and where is he now?" asked McGonagall when Harry did not say anything more.

Still he said nothing. He did not want to mention the diary. It would not work now and there was no telling whether Dumbledore would

believe that Riddle had forced Nymph into committing the crimes of the heir of Slytherin. If he didn't believe her, she would be expelled and possibly even sent to Azkaban. Nymph was a victim to Riddle but would Dumbledore believe them?

Before Harry had decided on a course of action, Nymph stepped forwards and opened her mouth to speak. She had only gotten out the words "It was-" however, when McGonagall gave a cry of horror.

"Potter, your arm!"

Harry glanced down. The basilisk fang was still protruding, looking ghastly. Whilst he had been speaking, Nymph had been standing in front of his arm, shielding it from view but now that she had stepped forwards, it was in clear view. Hurriedly, he tried to hide it behind his back, no matter how useless the action seemed.

"I think," said Sir slowly. "That the time to reveal your arm would be now. Pity really; your arm will be a great weapon someday. It's just a shame it won't be a surprise. Show Dumbledore your arm but do not tell him that you can utilise it to help with wandless magic or how you got it. Claim that you do not remember."

Without a second thought, Harry brought out his arm for inspection by Dumbledore, the basilisk fang still firmly spearing it. With a sigh, he pulled up the sleeve of his robe (with some difficulty) up past the fang so that the room's occupants could see the piercing well.

"Yeah," he said in a would-be casual voice. "I accidentally got bitten by the basilisk too."

Silence, then,

"Would you like for me to remove the fang, Harry?" asked Dumbledore suddenly. Harry blinked. Of all the things he had been expecting to be said, that was not one of them.

Surprising even himself, he shook his head. For some reason, he knew that taking the fang out was something he should do himself. Taking his wand in his left hand, he pointed it at the fang and slowly, ever so slowly, the fang came loose, leaving a hole in his arm for a

few moments. Then, Harry healed the wood over, like it was skin. New wood replaced the chunk that was missing but he hadn't used his wand to do it, though it might have appeared that way. Somehow, even though his right arm wasn't holding his wand, it felt like it was. His arm still felt that glowing warmth that surrounded his hand whenever he held his wand. It was almost as if... as if his arm was a wand of its own.

"You are such a bloody cheater!" cried Sir into the silence causing Harry to jump. *"First, you use a bloody wooden arm to aid you in casting magic, now you get bitten by a bloody basilisk and use its venom as the core of your bloody wand arm! It's not fair! While the rest of us slave away at learning to cast wandlessly, you get a bloody inbuilt wand!"*

Harry could not keep from bursting out laughing at the petulance in Sir's normally serious and mature voice. Now it was the turn of everyone else in the room to jump. Thinking quickly to justify this unexpected laughter, Harry said, "Your faces, they're just *too* funny."

"Harry," said Dumbledore slowly, coming out of his shock at the wood instead of flesh in his arm. "How did you get a wooden arm?"

"No idea," said Harry cheerfully. "I can't remember."

"Surely you remember losing your arm, Potter," said McGonagall sharply.

"Nope."

"Why have you refused to reveal it before now?" asked Dumbledore.

Harry frowned, feeling the conversation turn into a sort of interrogation but answered nonetheless. "I figured that not remembering something this important couldn't be a good sign and I thought you'd want to have me committed to a hospital." Okay, so maybe it wasn't the *most* believable excuse but it seemed to work well enough.

"Harry, you know I would never force you to do anything you did not want to unless it was absolutely necessary." He didn't bother to keep

the look of disbelief off his face. What about heaping spells upon him to keep him from mentioning his previous name or to keep him from leaving Hogwarts? What about refusing to let him leave for summer? "Would you allow me to inspect your arm? I fear that someone with ill intent towards you may have given you that arm and if that is the case, there may well be some sort of spell upon it."

He snorted derisively before answering, as though it was obvious, "No." There was no way in hell he was letting Dumbledore use even more spells on him. "If there was a spell on it that was going to harm me, don't you think it would have done it already?"

"Harry, I only want to inspect it to ensure your safety and for your own good."

"Then why don't you go kill someone? Seemed to work for you last time."

There was silence for a moment.

"We've been over this before, Harry," said Dumbledore wearily. "Now is not the time to do so again. Let us return to the matter at hand. How did Tom Riddle come to appear today?"

To Harry it felt strangely like Dumbledore was avoiding the issue because he knew he was wrong but before he could protest against the change of subject, Nymph spoke.

"It were me, professor," she said, her voice shaking slightly. Harry blinked at her for a moment before realising that she wasn't actually as meek and sorrowful as her voice suggested. She was one hell of an actress. It was no wonder she was in Slytherin. "Well, it were kind of me... All year I've been writing in his diary and Tom's been writing back. I didn't realise what was happening. I thought I were just getting forgetful but I could never remember where I'd been when the attacks was happening. But Tom, he took over my body and I woke up in the Chamber."

Dumbledore nodded, seeming to accept this. Harry pulled the diary out from within his pocket and placed it on the desk beside the basilisk fang.

“Tom was taking her soul when I got there and I worked out that he was doing it through the diary. So when the basilisk was killed and I was bitten, I speared the diary too and he... died.”

“Brilliant,” said Dumbledore softly, examining the diary. “Of course, he was probably the most brilliant student Hogwarts has ever seen. How is it, if you don’t mind my asking, Miss LeStrange, that you came to have the diary?”

Now Nymph looked truly nervous. “I, well, I took it. From that Weasley girl’s bag. I thought it was hers but when it was blank I started investigating it and that’s when Tom started writing to me.”

“Hang on,” said Harry slowly. “That day, when all the pixies were all over the school, you took it then, didn’t you?” Vaguely he remembered meeting Nymph and the Weasley girl in the corridor and seeing Nymph rifling through the other girl’s bag.

Nymph only nodded, still looking at Dumbledore for his reaction.

“Twenty points, I think, off Slytherin for stealing,” said the old wizard. “I think you should go up to the hospital wing, Miss LeStrange. This has been a terrible ordeal for you. There will be no punishment, however, for anything else. Older and wiser wizards than you have been hoodwinked by Lord Voldemort. Professor McGonagall will escort you to the hospital wing.”

“Thanks professor,” sighed Nymph in relief before promptly leaving with McGonagall, after one last look at Harry.

“Harry,” said Dumbledore once the door had closed behind them. “I wanted a moment to speak with you alone and talk about your living situation this summer. I would like for you to spend the main duration of it here at Hogwarts again. I am aware that last summer you disappeared and have no recollection of it but I am confident, with the new spells I have placed upon you on your denouncing of your other name, that this year no such event will happen. You will be quite safe here this summer.”

“Spiffing,” Harry bit out. “Is that all?”

“You will also receive two hundred points for Gryffindor and a Special Awards for Services to the School. Other than that, you may leave.”

Harry turned and had walked to the door, quite furious with Dumbledore *again*, when something nagged at the back of his mind and he could not resist turning to ask.

“Professor, my parents, were they... were they good followers of yours during the war?”

“The best,” said Dumbledore, obviously taking this question for simple curiosity. “You would be very proud of them. They fought with me right up to their deaths.”

Harry did not wait for any more. He just turned and left the office, barely glancing at Lucius Malfoy as he stormed in. He had much to think about still but only had one real question left.

Why didn't he remember where *he* was during the attacks?

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When Harry returned to the Gryffindor common room, there was immediately an intake of breath and a hasty scuttle away from him. He merely rolled his eyes. Evidently, his filthy, battered and torn appearance made him look very startling. Well, it could also have been the fact that he was still wielding the fang that had lodged itself in his arm that scared his peers. Silence reigned for several moments, leaving the Gryffindors glaring at one at Harry and Harry glaring at the rest of them.

“Go back to where you belong, Slytherin!” cried Ron eventually, breaking the silence. There were murmurs of agreement.

“And where would that be?”

“I don't know where it is scum like you meet!” Ron's ears were red but whether it was from anger or from all the eyes that were staring at him, Harry was not sure. “All I know is that you opened the Chamber of Secrets and tried to kill us all.”

"It can't have been him," interrupted one of the twins. Harry turned to focus his glare on them. Not only did he *not* need their assistance but he didn't *want* it. He was perfectly capable of fighting his own battles, thank you very much.

"He would never have told the monster to get his friend," added the other.

"Course he would have!" exclaimed Ron, doing quite a good job at rallying the other Gryffindors. "Don't you see? Either he lost control of the monster or he made Lestrage stage her own capture so that it wouldn't look suspicious when he went to save her and look like a hero."

"Why the hell would I tell all of *you* people that I was Jeremy White if that was the case? I have better uses of my time than trying to prove to you that I'm some superhero."

"My god!" cried some unknown Gryffindor from the crowd. "Look at his arm!"

It had taken them a surprising amount of time to notice that he had a wooden arm, Harry noted mildly.

"It's probably the price he had to pay for his evil Dark Arts rituals," sneered Ron, though he wasn't too great at pulling off sneers. They did not befit him.

"You know what," began Harry, already more than a little irritated by the second youngest red head. Months of his annoyance were coming to surface in Harry's mind. "*Furnunculus!*"

Boils immediately sprang up all over Ron's face and arms and at the same time, the force of the curse flung him backwards, through the crowd, and into the wall. Ron looked in horror at the state his hands had already disintegrated to. He leapt to his feet, looking like he was about to retaliate to Harry, but Harry was faster. With a flick of his wand, Ron was flung back onto the wall, hitting his head and falling quite unconscious.

“None of you are going to say *anything* about this to *anyone*, understood?” Harry asked the room, nice and clearly. It would be interesting to see if they would obey him or not. If they did, then he would basically be able to control the entire Gryffindor house and the possibilities from then were endless. More than that, he didn’t want to let Dumbledore know that he had broken through his spells somehow. Perhaps, just perhaps, he had broken through the others with his accidental magic too – he was sure that was what had done the trick.

“There’s a lot worse where that came from if I find out that you *have* said something,” he added sweetly.

People were nodding their heads fervently around the room. Well, that took care of that problem. Now, how was he going to leave Hogwarts for the summer?

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The rest of the summer term passed in a flash for Harry. Hogwarts was back to normal with a few exceptions; most of the Gryffindor house was terrified of Harry but many of them did not refrain from glaring at him. True to their nodding, no one told any of the teachers about his revelation of his other identity. However, somehow the rest of the pupils at Hogwarts knew by the end of the day and those who had been petrified found out too. The only important person, Dumbledore, did not find out though, much to Harry’s relief.

He did not truly believe that he was capable of just walking out of Hogwarts again, even if he had managed to mysteriously remove Dumbledore’s spells. The headmaster would be keeping a very close eye on him this time, he was sure, but it was Nymph who came up with the pathetically simple solution to the problem that might just work. She was going to shrink her items in her trunk and Harry was going to hide within it for the entire duration of the journey back to London. He wasn’t really looking forwards to it that much but if that was what it took, it was what he was going to do.

This being the case, it was on a bright, sunny day that Harry found himself squashed into a trunk (with a few air holes) and just enough room to turn over onto his other side. The house-elves took the trunk along with the other Slytherins (he had snuck into their common room

again) without checking the contents. He felt it shift as it was loaded into a compartment and a while later he felt the steady rumbling of the engine as the train left Hogsmeade Station away from Hogwarts. He clenched his eyes, waiting for the horrible sensation of invisible hands grabbing him and preventing him from leaving.

It never came.

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Dumbledore sat in his office, wearily rubbing the bridge of his nose as he put off the inevitable paperwork that he had to sort for the summer. It had certainly been a long, trying year. He wasn't quite sure he had ever had one as difficult as it. Not even the first time the Chamber had been opened had he had such a trouble dealing with one pupil. No matter, Harry had changed and was now safely in his dormitory as the rest of the pupils left for their various homes for the summer. He regretted having to keep him at Hogwarts, especially since he seemed so against the idea, but it was necessary. It was simply not safe for him anywhere else.

Walking over to one of his cabinets, Dumbledore checked the trinket that would tell him where Harry was. Yes, there was the familiar dot labelling him still in Gryffindor common room. Ever since Harry had rescued Miss LeStrange from the Chamber of Secrets, he seemed to be spending all of his time in the common room. He was certainly always there whenever he checked. It had been a very noble thing for Harry to have gone to her rescue and Dumbledore was proud of him for it. It really showed that he had, at last, changed his rebellious ways and had finally seen that he would get no where by fighting alone. The rest of the school seemed to admire him for it too; nearly every pupil was caught staring at him or whispering about him at mealtimes now. Yes, Dumbledore was proud of Harry; he had finally become the boy he should have grown up to be. If only he would put the lies his aunt had told him behind.

Dumbledore frowned as the dot showing Harry's position flickered and then disappeared. He waited for a moment – the spell must have been affected by something; it would return in a few seconds. It didn't.

Hastily, he cast a spell that should tell him Harry's whereabouts. It came up blank.

Harry Potter had left Hogwarts.

Again.

The train ride away from Hogwarts was particularly long and painful for Harry. Nymph, like most paranoid Slytherins, had *locked* her trunk preventing Harry from leaving unless she wanted him to. It was probably a good thing that he spent the *hours* of train ride in the trunk, however. There would have been a high possibility of someone seeing him and it was somehow known throughout the school that he wasn't supposed to leave Hogwarts for the summer. Of course, Harry had absolutely no idea how Ravenclaw sixth years found out but he had a feeling that Dumbledore had been spreading the news around. If someone *had* seen him, though, he had no doubt that someone would have reported him to Dumbledore and there would have been a mass search for him at platform nine and three quarters. He didn't come out of the trunk, however. Instead, Harry spent hours crammed in with all of Nymph's school supplies (and a couple of air holes). Needless to say, by the time he finally felt the trunk being lifted off the train he was more than a little sore and cramped.

His entrapment did not end with the train tracks, however. It took what he thought to be an hour more (it was hard to tell when he was *locked in a trunk*) of the trunk rolling on its wheels (and tipping Harry's head downwards) for the lid to finally be opened and he could breath something other than stale air. When the lid was opened, however, the light burned holes through his eyelids and he was so unused to moving at all, that he simply lay there for a few moments, trying to will his muscles into use.

"Oh gods!" cried Nymph from somewhere above him. "I thoughts there was enough air holes! I didn't mean to killed you!"

Then, before Harry could assure her – if somewhat groggily – that he wasn't dead, the trunk was tipped savagely on its side and he tumbled out of it along with several of Nymph's books. He groaned, trying in vain to move his aching limbs. Well, he wouldn't be going anywhere for a while.

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As Harry expected, he did not go anywhere for some time. It took him over an hour to be able to stretch his legs without excruciating pain let alone to get up and walk somewhere. Oh well, he wasn't too bothered about it. The important thing was that he was away from Hogwarts and Dumbledore yet again and the old fool hadn't been able to prevent him. Yet again, Harry had won one over him and it felt pretty good. Slowly, little by little, he would gain control of his life. Of course, the ultimate way to do so would be to kill Dumbledore but he wasn't nearly powerful enough to do that yet.

While Harry had been trying to gather his equilibrium, Nymph, deeming it safe to leave him to it, left with her trunk to "stash it somewhere" for the summer. It was beyond Harry where she was going to put it but he was sure she would find someplace for it. This left him sufficiently alone to question Sir about how he had managed to escape in the first place.

"Well, for some time I had discovered the one spell Dumbledore had cast that would not be detected if removed. Before your little... adventure... in the Chamber of Secrets, I had been slowly unravelling the spells upon you. I believe when that Weasley boy angered you sufficiently, you used accidental magic to displace all the spells that remained. I am convinced they lingered in the Gryffindor common room, which would be why Dumbledore did not realise before that they had been removed. As such, he would have believed you to be in the common room constantly and would not have been aware that you broke through his speaking spells. Really, it is quite an ingenious way to get around him, despite the fact that you did so unintentionally. If you can learn to harness that kind of power normally, I will be most impressed."

For it to be possible for Sir to be impressed was praise indeed. Well, Harry had a chance of impressing him at least, even if it was a minute one.

"At least that's one problem solved," Harry mused into the air.

"What are you babbling about now?"

"Well, I still don't know where I was during the attacks on the school, do I?"

"You don't?"

Harry frowned. "No... didn't you know that?"

"No... well, that is interesting news. Most unpredicted."

"Huh? Do you know where I was?"

"You know, if you had asked earlier I am sure it would have saved you much confusion. Nevertheless I do know where you were. I believe I may be at fault."

What? It was all Harry could do to sit blinking at the room, not that his muscles were very cooperative anyway. How could it have been Sir's fault? How much could a disembodied voice possibly affect his mind? He wasn't sure he wanted to know the answer.

"It was rather unfortunate timing, I must say. I was trying to expel myself from your body, you see. I was rather hoping that I would be able to travel to another vessel capable of sustaining me but my attempts were obviously futile. It appears that you are either the only person at Hogwarts with the mental capacity of sustaining two minds without going insane, the only one with enough power to do so or you are the only one who's mind is open to such a thing. Or all of the above, I am not quite certain."

"But why didn't you tell me what you were doing? I could have helped! At least then I would have known I wasn't going crazy and attacking students without realising it!"

"I was quite unaware that you were suffering from memory lapses. If you had told me sooner, I would have informed you of my endeavour, I assure you. However, I wished it to be a surprise."

Well, that was the oddest surprise he would ever have received, Harry could not help but think. The whole thing seemed a little strange to him. He wasn't sorry that Sir was trying to escape from his mind, quite the contrary. Not only was he convinced at times that he was, in fact, going insane, it was slightly unnerving to have someone watching your every move.

But why did Sir's attempts at leaving leave him without memories? It didn't make any sense. There seemed to be no reason why one thing should link to the other. Sir appeared to have thought along the same lines.

"I can only think that your memory lapses must have been triggered somehow by the excess use of your power that I used. Not having my own body with which to use magic, I used yours instead but it is possible that the amount I required was too great. That is why I attempted to detach myself from your body while you were asleep; I was hoping that while you were dormant and requiring little energy, I could harness the unused energy but it seems that too was the wrong way to go about it. I do not believe that any one body can possibly hold enough power to expel me far enough into another vessel, or better yet, my own body. It could also be possible that I am incapable of residing in anything other than this body and my own. I might have only ended up in your body because I was freed from my last residence and the need to survive was great enough to send me to the nearest, and possibly only, dwelling."

Harry was convinced that Sir had forgotten completely about him and was simply musing to himself. He seemed distant and would probably answer anything Harry asked without thinking about it. Suddenly, Harry was struck by an idea.

"What was your name before you lost your body?" he asked with baited breath.

"I was known as – wait! Dare you try and trick me, boy?" Harry could not help but feel that he had crossed a line filled with spikes.

"Erm, no?" he tried weakly.

But instead of the brutal shouting he expected or even the pain from some curse or other, Sir chuckled. *"At last, you are learning. You will get no where unless you are prepared to trick those around you, even those you think you know. As soon as I have my body back, however, I will tell you who I was. Not until then."*

Harry could only shake his head in wonder at that and sit back and try to stretch his stiff muscles as he waited for Nymph to return.

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A little white lie never hurt anyone. It would have been possible to tell the complete and honest truth, but not without fear of driving the boy away from him forever. He was so stubborn at times and naïve at others. In all their time together, the boy was only just learning to question all and be secretive about everything now. One would have thought that Harry would have learnt that each and every detail could be fatal. A casual word to a friend here, a slip of the tongue there, everything could be used against him. Moreover, he should have learnt long ago that every person, no matter how trustworthy they appeared, should not be trusted and would always be withholding information. It was Harry's job, therefore, to find out what it was.

Of course, it hadn't been completely necessary to tell the boy about his recent attempts at finding his own body but the boy seemed to find these sort of things trust inspiring. Besides, now the boy could help him in his endeavours. With the boy's aid – not to mention the use of his body without considerable effort – it would be much easier to regain his body and *then*, then things would really start to roll. If he told Harry his name now, however, there was a chance of him turning away from him for all eternity. No, it was better to bide his time until he was sure the boy wouldn't be so easily swayed.

There were some things that Harry really didn't need to know. At least, he didn't need to know them yet. The fact that he hadn't just been trying to expel himself from the boy's body was a prime example of this. There was no telling what would happen if the boy knew the truth. It was a shame that it hadn't worked, though. He hadn't counted on the possibility that there were no other vessels in Hogwarts capable of harbouring his soul. If there had been, he was most curious to know if his plan would have succeeded. He had rather hoped that he would have been able to expel himself from Harry's body but still have a deep enough connection to be able to return to it at will and possibly take control of it at will, like he was capable of now. It was rather difficult to maintain that control for long, however, but it was getting easier with practise.

Not that Harry knew he was practising this skill, of course. He would only practise it a little and make the boy do things when he thought

he was in control. Harry never noticed the little things, a sneeze in the middle of class, a scratch of the nose, a hand run through his hair. What he was impressed with, however, was the ability he had managed to manifest of taking control of the boy's body while he was asleep without him ever knowing a thing. It was really quite ingenious. There was no telling the things he could do with it. And if he could do that at will while residing within his own body, well, the possibilities were limitless.

But, of course, nothing would come of it. At least for a long while yet. First, train the boy. Second, get his body back. Third, they get revenge on Dumbledore.

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When Nymph returned, it was with a determined spring in her step. She, as per usual, seemed far too cheerful. Harry groaned, stretching again.

"Why are you always so damn perky?"

She grinned in return. "Because I, little Harry –"

"*Little!*"

" – are a certified genius. I has found us a place to stay for the summer. Well, I thinks I have."

"You *think* you have?" Harry asked dubiously. A sense of foreboding came over him; by the sounds of it, Nymph's plan was already risky.

"Yeah, I thinks so. I've found where our old gang is staying at the moment. I think. Well, if they're using the same codes they used before, I has. It's hard to tell. Besides, if I has found them, I'm sure they'll be dead chuffed to see us again. Remember that game of dares we had last time? I reckons we could gets another game going."

"Sure, Nymph... Let's focus on finding them first, yeah?" The last thing he wanted to do was get involved in another game of *dares*.

Why did she have to be so obsessed with the game? It never ended well. Ever.

“So let’s go!” cried Nymph suddenly and she lunged at Harry, pulled him to his feet and clapped him so heartily on the back that his tired muscles gave way beneath him and he fell over. “Oh, I guess I should’ve asked if you was able to walk first, huh?”

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Harry bit his lip nervously and tried to quieten his breathing. Each footstep they took seemed to echo loudly off battered remains of walls. They were walking slowly towards an abandoned looking building in a more than a little dubious area of London. Harry wasn’t sure how she had done it, but Nymph had appeared to be following an invisible trail that only she could detect. To him everything just looked it’s usual run down self. However, when someone had stopped them and offered to sell them drugs somewhere along their route, Nymph had taken this as a sign of encouragement that they were going in the right direction and after a half hour more of walking – which stretched Harry’s muscles sufficiently that they were no longer stiff – they had arrived at this place.

There was silence all around and not a creature was stirring, though Harry was a little uncertain as to what creatures could be living there. He wasn’t sure he really wanted to find anything alive in this place. Perhaps his recent adventures in the Chamber of Secrets were making him paranoid but something seemed decidedly off about the place. Nymph, on the other hand, was walking cheerfully onwards as though there was no where else she’d rather be.

A stone rattled underfoot and echoed around them. Harry frowned; he hadn’t kicked it and he wasn’t sure that Nymph had moved her foot...

Suddenly, from all around them, people were charging towards them, metal objects in their hands glinting off what little light there was through the clouds. Instinctively, Harry ducked the first person who reached him, sending them flying over his shoulder. Unfortunately, even though he was good at fighting, he was out of practise. Even had he been in practise he doubted whether he and Nymph would have been able to take on the onslaught that was attacking them.

Fists, weapons, feet and even teeth were coming at them from all sides and Harry was so bewildered that he wasn't sure quite which direction he was supposed to be fighting in. In under a minute, both he and Nymph were pinned with their arms held behind their backs, surrounded by many thin, dirty faces.

"Hey, what's you doing?" Nymph demanded, struggling against her captors and glaring around at them all. "Don't you bloody fools recognise us?"

The crowd around the just stared at her, silent and staring, until a large, threatening looking boy stepped forwards to address them. "Well, well, didn't expect you to be back round here again, Nymph."

Nymph stopped struggling slightly to peer at the boy through narrowed eyes. "Sledge, that you?"

"Unfortunately, we won't be able to accommodate you anymore," continued the boy, ignoring Nymph. "There's a spy in our midst, a traitor if you will, and I will *not* put the rest of us at risk to the coppers for the sake of two lousy little kids. You can clear off right now, you hear? And if you come back, we'll kill you. You aren't welcome here any more."

"You're joking, ain't you?" asked Nymph but she did not sound very sure. Their captors released them.

"You have ten seconds to leave and never return."

Sledge held up his fingers. When they did not move, he put one down. Then another. By the third, they were already running as fast as they could away. They weren't entirely sure what had happened but they didn't really want to stick around to find out the details. They knew the important thing; they would find no shelter there. After running for a considerable distance, Nymph and Harry slowed to a walk. They would just have to look after each other then. Once again, it was just the two of them. The two of them against the world.

Disclaimer: For the last time, I say to you all, I do not own Harry Potter.

AN: This is it: the end. Most likely the last piece of fanfiction I will ever write. I would like to dedicate this story to all the great people who have read it, to all those who have reviewed it, and to all those who didn't eat me when I was late updating. I started this story two years ago when I was thirteen and I end it now when I am very almost fifteen. It's been a great experience. I'd like to thank my real life friends (you know who you are) for their ideas, inspiration and for reading. I'd like to thank each and every reader, each and every reviewer, for putting up with me this long. With that said, I bid you all farewell and happy reading and writing. I leave you to write other things myself and who knows, one day you might see my name in a bookshop somewhere.

A	Life	Alone
What	Happens	Next
<u>By Loony</u>		

The next few days passed relatively peacefully for Nymph and Harry. They found themselves running a fair number of times when they realised their pick-pocketing skills weren't *quite* up to scratch. They did, however, find themselves sleeping nice and dryly in an abandoned building that Nymph had stashed her trunk in – it appeared to be an old warehouse of some sort. Unfortunately, the door was sealed shut with cement or some other such material and they had to constantly leave and enter through the window but other than that they stayed there quite comfortably even with the draft.

They were just walking through London one day when Harry felt the strange sensation of being watched. He whirled around peering everywhere but could not find the perpetrator in the crowd. Suddenly, something went whizzing past his ear but he did not stick around to find out. There were yells from behind him as he yelled and Harry thought he could hear Snape's voice among them. Obviously he had been found by Dumbledore's crew. Dodging in and out of the crowd, Harry spent a good ten minutes ducking spells but eventually he thought he had managed to lose whoever it had been that was

following him. Of course, that was until he ran right into a giant pair of arms. Twisting slightly, he saw himself held firmly by Hagrid, the half-giant gamekeeper. Fortunately for Harry, he sneezed at the exact moment that four spells came from several different directions, aimed straight for him. His sneeze, however, had thrown him forwards slightly and all four spells had hit Hagrid behind him, who stumbled backwards, inadvertently releasing him. Without a second of hesitation, Harry bolted. He heard footsteps behind him but he also heard a quiet suggestion in his ear from Sir. Nodding, Harry felt himself releasing his control on his body and the strange sensation of Sir taking over. A split second later, he had disappeared to safety.

The weeks flew by for Harry and Nymph and from then on, they moved around frequently. Harry was not sure how Dumbledore had found out where he was but he sincerely hoped that it was just a lucky guess. He was not, however, bothered by the old man or his cronies again that summer.

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One especially warm day, Nymph was reading through the paper she had lifted from a passer-by's bag.

Nymph beckoned Harry over, holding out the paper as if it was a bomb. "Harry I think you should see this..."

Blinking in surprise he gazed down at the headline. "*Victim of hit and run finally identified,*" it read. Shrugging, he handed it back to her. So? It wasn't any of his concern if they had found out what poor boy had died in a car accident.

"Harry," she continued slowly, unsurely. "Look at the picture of the boy that got hit, and then look at the date it happened."

The picture of the boy that had been hit had been taken a couple of weeks before the accident, the newspaper said. It was a young boy with blonde hair, a round face and a small nose. As Nymph had instructed him, Harry then glanced at the date of the accident. June 1990.

Shrugging again, he looked at her. Nymph was biting her lip now, as if nervous about telling him something. "Harry, this were the accident we all thoughts Mir was in."

Mir? Harry hadn't thought about him in a long while. He vaguely remembered his pale taught face, his scared eyes. A pang of guilt racked through Harry. It was because of him that Mir was dead. Mir had died trying to find him. But what was Nymph getting at? The boy in the picture was obviously not Mir. Wait, did she mean...? No, it was impossible...

"Mir's alive, Harry."

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Together, Nymph and Harry spent the remainder of their summer searching for clues as to Mir's whereabouts, if he was, in fact, alive. There was no telling what had happened to him. If Mir had been alive, surely he would have contacted Harry somehow? But what if he had been in some *other* accident? What if he had died some other way and he had never known? He dismissed the thought. His imagination was running away from him. Mir was alive. He had to be. But surely, Mir would have gone to Hogwarts? Again Harry felt a pang of guilt throb in his chest. He had promised to help find Mir's sister but he had completely forgotten. He made a mental note to himself to search for her at school.

Their searches for Mir were fruitless but Harry resolved to try and use magic to find him as soon as he was back at Hogwarts. If he used magic now, he would be immediately found by Dumbledore, which he most definitely did not want. All too soon, the summer was over but Mir had yet to give any hint that he was alive.

Once Harry had arrived on the station (he had gone separately from Nymph in order to look more inconspicuous) he was immediately accosted by McGonagall, pale faced and her lip a thin line. She informed him that Dumbledore wanted to speak to him after the feast. Apparently they had been searching for him more fervently than ever, scared that he had been kidnapped by Sirius Black, who, to Harry's amazement, had escaped Azkaban. But *why* had he escaped? Could he have finally come to his senses and realised Dumbledore's

treachery? If that was the case, Sirius must have remembered Harry's promise to help prove his innocence.

On the train, Harry, found to his amusement, that along with Nymph and Malfoy, he was sharing a compartment with Remus Lupin, who he vaguely remembered being tackled by Nymph when he caught him. Nymph and Malfoy spent the majority of the time discussing Sirius Black but Harry wisely kept his opinions to himself. He needed to find out why he had escaped first. However, Nymph did take a break to stun Lupin so that he would not wake whilst she was drawing on his face with permanent black ink.

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Harry looked up in surprise as the train jolted to a halt. They couldn't possibly be at Hogwarts yet, could they? It was dark outside the window and he couldn't see anything. Without warning a deep cold seemed to infiltrate his very bones and his breath rose as mist before him. The lights flickered out.

"What's going on?" came Nymph's voice from beside him.

Harry said nothing but quickly lit his wand, casting an eerie glow over the pale faces of Malfoy and Nymph and the still stunned Lupin. Screams came from compartments further down the train.

"Think we ought to wake him?" Harry asked, gesturing vaguely to Lupin. The other two nodded and Harry was just turning so that he could get a good aim to cast the spell, when the door slid open and the cold seemed to intensify.

Standing in the doorway was a dementor. Harry recognised it as one at once. He saw a grey scabbed hand flex at its sleeve's end. Then he saw no more.

He was falling, spinning. He had no control. It was just endless falling. Then he heard them, the voices.

"Mir's dead, Harry. He died looking for you."

"A fire burned the night Harry Potter died. They're all gone. Dead."

Growling. The sound of a werewolf snarling.

“Lily, take Harry and go! It’s Him! Go! Run! I’ll hold him off –“

The sounds of someone stumbling from a room – a door bursting open – a cackle of high laughter.

He was falling, drowning in mist, spinning out of control.

“Not Harry, not Harry, please not Harry!”

“Stand aside, you silly girl... stand aside, now...”

“Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead! Not Harry! Please... have mercy... have mercy...”

A shrill voice was laughing, the woman was screaming, and Harry knew no more.

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It turned out that Harry had passed out from a severe reaction to the dementors. Malfoy and Nymph didn’t look so cheerful either. Malfoy had eventually managed to reawaken Lupin and Lupin had sent the dementor away, though it was rather odd to see the wizard standing, looking very serious, when he had a black moustache, beard, mono-brow, glasses and vampire doodled onto his face. Lupin looked at them all, frowning at Malfoy, blinking in surprise and Nymph and rested his eyes a bit longer on Harry, before giving them some chocolate and leaving to talk to the driver. When he returned, Nymph greeted him cheerfully and it was obvious that Lupin recognised her.

When he entered the Great Hall, Dumbledore was looking down at him with relief clearly written on his face. The rest of the hall was looking at him with no such emotion. On their faces was contempt, hatred and, surprisingly, mockery. It appeared that news of him losing consciousness at the dementors had spread fast.

After the feast, Harry obediently went to Dumbledore’s office. He was beginning to think that he spent more time there than in his own common room. The gargoyle jumped out the way obediently for him

without waiting for the password (perhaps it could recognise him) and Dumbledore greeted him solemnly inside. Dumbledore discussed his usual fears of him having been kidnapped, feared for his safety, etcetera, but Harry did not pay much attention. He also mentioned how it did not make him a “lesser man” for having a bad reaction to the dementors. After that, the headmaster went on to question him as to how he removed the spells that were on him, to which Harry just shrugged, using the occlumency that he had been practising over the summer. Finally, he was allowed to return to his dormitory.

Once in the common room, Harry found that the entirety of the Gryffindor house, other than the first years, who had obediently gone to bed, seemed to be discussing him. There appeared to be some sort of argument going on. The newest theory was that he was in league with Sirius Black, which was partly true. Harry was certainly not against him, at least. The rest of the house, who did not believe this rumour, were just expressing their dislike of him and their belief that he should not be in the noble house of Gryffindor. Only the Weasley twins were defending him, to his annoyance. Why couldn't they stay out of his business? When he entered, these opinions were very kindly thrown at him. Immediately the twins rose to his defence but Harry silenced them by advancing on them, drawing a knife, and giving them a cheerful threat. They nodded their consent but Harry could tell they were not in the slightest deterred. They were crazy; that was the only explanation. The rest of the house, were efficiently scared into silence and left him alone for the night.

As soon as Harry was in the dormitory (which was before his other dorm mates) he performed the spell that *should* have located Mir, if he was in fact alive. Rather than point him in the direction of the boy, as the spell should have done, it span wildly in circles before jumping out of his hand and falling to the floor, only to roll uselessly away. Did that mean that Mir was dead? Or was there a spell on him preventing Harry from finding him with a spell? But if that was the case, was the spell in protection against Harry, or someone else?

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The next week was very eventful for Harry with his new classes. His first new class was divination, which he had taken solely for the

reason that he already had a prophecy about him; it couldn't help to learn to look at them in closer detail, could it? However, the class turned out to be a lot of rubbish with the fraud for a teacher. Trelawney had predicted his death, to most of the class's amusement, so Harry had predicted hers right back at her. They had spent the better half of the lesson arguing about which of them was going to die.

His other new class had been Care of Magical Creatures, which had been no more enjoyable. Hagrid, the great oaf, had picked on him to demonstrate, which amused Malfoy to no end. Not only had Harry had to pet the monstrosity that was a Hippogryff, he had had to *ride* the thing, which had petrified him to no end. He had hated it. Not only was he flying at great heights, he had no control whatsoever over the *thing*. So in retaliation to Hagrid, Harry had tricked Ron into insulting the Hippogryff, causing the beast to lash out at him, efficiently wounding him.

But his worst class of the week had been defence by far. They had been introduced to the *lovely* creatures that were boggarts. True, Neville's Professor Snape in a dress had been entertaining but Harry could not say the same for his own boggart.

It had started out as just a sensation, that horrible falling sensation with no control. But then it had become an image. A body. A dead body. Nymph's. But the boggart wasn't finished. Then it had transformed into another body. Mir's. But that still was the end. The boggart then changed into a third body, Aunt Petunia's. Aunt Petunia rose from her dead position on the floor, and raised an arm to point at Harry. He could almost hear the joints in her out of use body creaking.

"It's your fault," Aunt Petunia had said. "If it weren't for you, I'd still be alive."

Then, at last, almost thankfully, the boggart had transformed into a dementor and Harry had blacked out, hearing the voices of his dying parents just before doing so.

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Rumours had circulated the school in floods. Most of the school seemed to believe that he had killed the people the boggart had

become, despite the fact that Nymph was still very much alive and roaming the school. Worst of all, however, was how his peers appeared to take this as a sign that he was weak and they could take advantage of him.

Something needed to be done. Sir very helpfully told Harry so. They would never achieve anything if their enemies thought he had a weakness or that they had the upper hand. A perfect chance came one night when he was in the common room and Hermione's cat attacked Ron's rat, which disrupted and annoyed the entire common room, Harry included. Without much hesitation, Harry snatched the snarling cat as it ran past and drew his knife. The common room gasped in shock as he drew it across the cat's skin. A pang of guilt went through Harry, but he was not bothered again by his fellow students.

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The weeks passed quickly after that and soon it was the day of Halloween and the first Hogsmeade trip for third years. Harry, not having a real guardian, attempted to sign his form himself and hand it in to McGonagall but she wasn't having any of it. He tried to argue his case but she was adamant, no doubt because of her fears of Sirius Black. This theory was proven true when she attempted to warn him that Sirius was out to kill him, which he promptly dismissed. Of all the reasons for Sirius to escape, killing him was not one of them.

Without anything else to do, Harry decided that it would be a good opportunity, with no one around, to visit Lupin and see where he stood on the issue of Sirius. Lupin, it transpired, had no doubt that Sirius was guilty, though there was a flicker of doubt that crossed his face when Harry explained what had really happened. Nevertheless, Lupin did not concede to the truth. Snape interrupted them at that moment bringing in a steaming goblet of some concoction for Lupin. Needless to say, Lupin was thoroughly warned of Harry by the time Snape left and Lupin was more than a little suspicious of him and his friends, which now, Harry realised, included Malfoy. He was not entirely sure when they had crossed that border.

That night, while everyone was at the feast, Sirius slashed the portrait of the Fat Lady, who guarded the entrance to Gryffindor tower. The school was once again abuzz with rumours and the castle was being scoured for the “murderer”. Sirius was not fool enough to stay in the castle, at least Harry assumed he wasn’t, but he could not have gone far. This being the case, Harry snuck out of the herd of students as they made their way to the Great Hall to stay for the night and slipped out into the cool night air outside.

Where could Sirius be? The forest was the most logical place to hide so Harry made his way over there, sticking as much to the shadows as he could. He had just passed the whomping willow, however, when he was tackled from behind by a massive beast. The beast turned out to be Sirius and together they hid just below the whomping willow, which, it transpired, had a passage underneath.

Sirius had not come to his senses after all. He was still of the belief that Dumbledore was *good* and *noble*. He had escaped because he had seen a picture of Pettigrew in a paper and now knew where he was. Harry, however, refused to help him or even listen properly. He would not help him if he was just going to free a man that Dumbledore would use.

“Harry, you don’t understand-“

“I understand perfectly. You’re with Dumbledore. *I get it.*”

“No, Pettigrew, he’s-“

“I don’t care! I’m not doing you any favours if you’re going to run around doing *Dumbledore’s* little missions.”

“I’m on *your* side! I just don’t think Dumbledore’s done anything wrong is all. Look, what do I have to do to prove it to you?”

In the end, Harry sent Sirius on a mission of his own to find Mir and bring him to Hogwarts. Harry didn’t actually believe Sirius would be any more successful than he had been but it couldn’t help to have another pair of eyes on the lookout.

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The weather steadily worsened at Hogwarts as the first Quidditch match that Gryffindor was playing in approached. Harry had only continued to play Quidditch under Sir's orders; apparently it was good for his "physical health". Harry didn't mind *too* much, as long as the rest of the team left him well enough alone.

The day before the match, Harry was running late to Defence Against the Dark Arts. He had accidentally left his book in the dormitory and had to run back for it. When he arrived in the room, however, Lupin was not there but Snape was leering in his usual spot. Lupin, said Snape, was ill, but Harry could not help but think back to the steaming goblet that Snape had given him. Could it have been poison? Who could tell what was really in potions, what they were capable of?

That last thought had given Sir an idea. He did not know if it would work, he did not know how long it would take to make and he did not know what effect it would have on Harry. However, if it *did* work, it would mean that Sir would have his body back and he would be free from Harry's mind. From then on, Harry spent every moment he could in the library, Sir in control of his body, reading books upon books on complicated potions that made no sense to Harry whatsoever.

Harry had arranged with Malfoy beforehand that he was just going to let the blonde capture the snitch. There was no need to try and catch it himself; he certainly didn't want to do Gryffindor any favours. The weather was not good and Harry was blown about terribly. Lightening flashed about the sky and a silhouette of a dog was illuminated in the stands. It was Sirius. He had come to watch the match, apparently. No soon had Harry thought this than he was hit with a sudden cold sensation. He looked down. Dementors. Desperately, he tried to block their effects out with occlumency but it did not work. He was falling.

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Harry's broom had smashed into the whomping willow, which smashed it to pieces, and he had to spend the next couple of days in the Hospital Wing. As soon as he was released, however, Sir took over his body and set straight to work on the potion in the Room,

which he now knew would take at least a couple of months. Weeks ran smoothly past but one morning, there was a most ominous message in the Great Hall.

“You let her die.”

Those were the words that were suspended in the middle of the Great Hall. Naturally, Dumbledore assumed it was Harry and called him to his office to question him, *again*. Harry, having done no such thing, denied all and would not listen to Dumbledore as he attempted to become a psychologist. Dumbledore seemed to think he was still feeling animosity towards him for killing his aunt. Harry did, of course, still hate Dumbledore for this but he smiled and told him that he was forgiven. If Dumbledore got suspicious now, there was a chance he could find out about the potion simmering a floor below. Harry had no idea who could have written the message, however.

The rest of the days up until Christmas passed by without incident and soon enough it was Christmas day and, to his surprise, he had received more than just a present from Nymph and Malfoy. He had also received a Firebolt with a note saying *“I’m on your side”*, obviously from Sirius. There was one other present for him, however. An invisibility cloak with the message, *“Your father left this in my possession before he died. It is time it was returned to you. Use it well.”* Harry wasn’t sure, but he had a nagging suspicion that it had been from Dumbledore, which did not help his animosity towards the old man. It would mean that he had been keeping something that was rightfully his from him for years.

The night of the welcome back feast was stormy again. Harry was not in a particularly good mood. He had spent the day in the recess of his mind, watching Sir mix various ingredients for his almighty potion. Harry wasn’t even entirely sure what it was that the potion was supposed to do. He was musing on this while Dumbledore rambled on in his speech.

BANG!

The wooden doors to the great Hall burst open. Lightning flashed in the sky-ceiling above them. Silhouetted in the doorway were two

forms. Nymph stood up and screamed. There was Sirius, in dog form, holding a barely conscious figure by the robes in his teeth.

It was Mir.

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Mir had been at Hogwarts all along. He hadn't wanted to reacquaint himself with Harry, after seeing all the trouble he got into. Mir just wanted to find his sister in peace. The previous summer, he had learnt that his sister, Chloe, had gone to a wizarding home that Dumbledore had assigned but that home had been attacked by death eaters, supporters of Lord Voldemort, and Chloe had died in the attack. Mir had been hiding at Hogwarts under glamour charms so that he would not be recognised and he had been using his birth name, Moon. Strangely enough, Mir had come from his middle name, like Nymph had come from Nymph's middle name. Mir had been out in the forest paying his respects to Chloe by burying the last thing he had of her, her stuffed toy. He had been attacked, however, by hippogriffs until he had been saved by Sirius (though he didn't know it had been Sirius, of course). That was the explanation he told Harry and Nymph.

Lupin had seen Sirius in dog form and had obviously recognised him. Luckily the man had been in shock at the sight of him and did not react. He did, however, issue Harry with a desperate word of caution, which Harry dismissed. Harry simply went down into the whumping willow's passage to meet Sirius, who was waiting there like he had expected. Sirius finally informed Harry that Peter Pettigrew was hiding as Ron's rat and Harry almost hit himself. Of course! Pettigrew could turn into a rat and Ron's rat very helpfully had a missing toe!

Unfortunately, time seemed to be against Harry. The potion that Sir had been making would be ready in a half hour and had to be drunk as soon as it was ready. Biting his lip, he sprinted to Gryffindor tower and hunted frantically for the rat. By the time he found it, he had fifteen minutes to get the rat to Lupin (who he knew would make sure that Pettigrew was convicted and Sirius freed) then to drink the potion. Could he make it? Sir instructed him to wait to drink the potion first, then to go to Lupin. Obediently, after being told that the potion

wouldn't take effect immediately, Harry obeyed and waited for the potion to finish. At Sir's word, he drunk it and, feeling no effects, he made his way to Lupin's office. Once he arrived at Lupin's office, however, he was beginning to feel a bit faint and dizzy. Regardless, he entered the office and presented the stunned rat to a shocked professor. Then he collapsed.

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Dumbledore looked at Madam Pomfrey worriedly. "What do you think brought this on?"

"I'm not sure... He appears to be perfectly healthy but a bit malnourished. I suppose the collapse might have been triggered from not eating properly but from the looks of it, it has been going on for some time. I do not see why it would suddenly come on now. The only reason I can think of is that his magic has been sustaining him until now. His magic seems to be intact but it is as if the moment his body produces it, it is used up elsewhere. I do not understand."

"Could he have taken something? A potion?"

"It is possible that he has taken drugs, either magical or muggle. The strange thing is, any time I try to cast a spell on his body to make it react, it is as if his body simply absorbs the magic."

"Most disturbing... You will notify me if there is any change? For now, I believe I have an ex-convict to free."

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"I'm a free man now, Remus."

"Yes, I know."

"But what about Harry? Where's he? I want to ask him to live with me."

"He's not what you expected, Sirius. He's friends with a Malfoy and a Lestranger."

“What? But he freed me! Surely he can’t be evil...”

“I don’t think he is, but he doesn’t seem to think much of Dumbledore.”

“I noticed. But that didn’t answer my question; where is he?”

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Harry was swirling in a black mist, trembling. People kept jumping out at him. Telling him things. Doing things. He had seen Dumbledore. He had been plotting Harry’s demise. But he had not known Harry was there. He had not known he was being watched. He had not known Harry had his proof.

He had seen Mir. Mir had told him not to trust Nymph but he wasn’t sure why. Then he had seen Nymph and she had said the same for Mir. Who could he trust? Was there anyone who was genuine?

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Sir could feel the pull of his original body. He was using Harry’s magic to sustain him as his spirit wandered slowly ever closer. It was taking a long, long time. There wasn’t enough magic to propel him any faster, however, although every spell the nurse cast was certainly helping. It didn’t look like he was getting his own body any time soon. It had already been two weeks but after the first week and a half, he had grown less vigilant and he had found himself back at the Hospital Wing. Yes, this was certainly going to be difficult.

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Ron smiled at Hermione. “Did you hear? Potter’s been in the Hospital Wing for *four weeks* now. They haven’t a clue what’s wrong with him and it doesn’t look like he’ll be coming round any time soon. Can you believe it? It’s been a whole month without him and there’s more to come!”

“I wonder what’s wrong with him...”

“Who cares?”

“Someone has to Ron; he doesn’t exactly have many people looking out for him.”

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Days turned to weeks and weeks turned to months. Dumbledore, Sirius, Remus and Madam Pomfrey constantly worried about Harry, who persistently did not wake. They had tried everything. It was as if he was asleep, but was incapable of waking. Sir continued his search for his body. It was difficult; he could feel it but he could not tell where it was. Occasionally he found himself back in the Hospital Wing and had to start again. Harry continued to visit people, without them noticing of course. He saw Remus plot how to betray him to Dumbledore, saw Malfoy plan how to trap Sirius in a hole, saw Dumbledore speculate how to kidnap him. But Harry was watching. He saw what they were doing. And as soon as he awoke, he would have his revenge.

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“The fourth triwizard champion,” said Dumbledore frowning at the piece of paper in his hands. “Is Harry Potter.”

“But, Professor Dumbledore,” asked McGonagall, ashen faced. “How is that possible? He’s been unconscious for months!”

“I’m not sure...”

“He’ll have to compete, Dumbledore,” Crouch murmured into the old wizard’s ear. “It’s the rules. His name came out. He must compete.”

“He’s not even conscious!”

“He must compete.”

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Harry blinked at the brightness of the Hospital Wing. Why did they insist on putting injured patients in a room that would blind them? They probably thought that they would be able to keep them in longer.

Well, that wouldn't work with him. He was leaving. He leapt out of bed, feeling very energetic and strangely unrestricted.

"Potter!" Madam Pomfrey was standing gaping at him.

"Stay back," he warned. He knew what she was trying to do. She wanted to give him potions so that he would have to stay under her care longer. Well, he wasn't taking anything.

"Potter, just stay there. The headmaster will be here shortly."

"Good for him. I won't be here." If Dumbledore saw him, he would be imprisoned in a room.

"Potter, you can't leave! You are ill!"

"I'm not."

"You've been unconscious for months! You are in no state to leave."

"I haven't."

"Yes you have! It's November now."

Harry hesitated. "It is?" She was lying obviously.

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Harry had to be physically restrained by Remus, Pomfrey, Sirius and Dumbledore before they could talk to him. He knew their plan though. They wanted him to join them and thought that if he spent enough time around them, he would start to think like them. Well, he wouldn't fall for it. He wouldn't listen to their lies about him being unconscious for months. He wouldn't listen to their lies that he had been hallucinating.

"Boy, snap out of it!"

"Sir!" said Harry aloud, scaring the four adults. "Where are you?"

"Not in your head," replied Sir. It was true. His voice wasn't coming from behind Harry but it was faint, as if coming from somewhere far

away. *"You have been trapped within your own mind for ten months, boy."*

"No, I haven't."

"Well, if you can't see it for yourself, I will have to make you see."

It was as if there was a loud sonic screech that filled Harry's head and he collapsed in pain, clutching at his head. It passed within moments however and afterwards he just *knew*, knew that he had been imagining it all. But it had seemed so real. Looking at the figures before him, he knew it would not be easy to forget what they had done.

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The situation was quickly explained to Harry. He was to compete in the first task in the triwizard tournament in a week. Sir, however, informed him that he *had* to compete and win. Apparently, the only way he would be able to get out of Hogwarts was for him to win the tournament, though he did not explain how or why this was. Still Sir would not tell Harry his name. On the other hand, Sir did tell Harry, what the first task was going to be and how he was to win it. He was to send a strong curse at the dragon's eye.

Nymph, Malfoy and Mir were overjoyed to see him back on his feet. Nymph and Mir were not getting along well, however. According to Malfoy they were constantly arguing and fighting. They had even, on occasion, started physically fighting without the use of wands.

The first task in the triwizard tournament rolled around faster than Harry had expected, though he had hardly had time to prepare. Still, he performed remarkably and came in first place. After the task, he saw the defence professor for the first time, Mad-Eye Moody. He was filled with rage. This was the man who had cast the curse that killed his aunt. Harry did not hesitate in attacking him. Dumbledore quickly put an end to their fighting, unfortunately, and Sir told him that he had to remain low-key for the year so that they would think he was merely a victim at the end of the year, whatever that meant. Sirius and Remus visited him after the task as well; Harry simply shrugged them off. He didn't know them. Sure, they had known his parents, but were

his parents really people he wanted to be associated with? Tom Riddle had said that if he had grown up with them he would have had to be a follower of Dumbledore and that was something he definitely didn't want.

Christmas rolled right up around the corner and with it the Yule Ball. As a "champion" Harry was expected to begin the dancing with a partner. Well, that was easy enough. He simply asked Nymph to go as friends and they went together and made a mockery of the whole dance.

The egg that Harry was expected to solve proved redundant. Sir told him directly after Christmas what the second task was and how he was to accomplish it. He was going to use the bubble-head charm to reach the merpeople and free his captive. This task proved as simple as the first and once again, Harry came in first place.

Sirius kept sending Harry letters about people who were apparently out to kill him but Harry burnt all these letters. He was more than capable of handling himself in the tournament and he already knew the plot to "kidnap" him at the end of it. He trusted Sir, which was more than he could say for any other adult.

After Harry and the other champions were informed what the third task was going to be, he went for a stroll in the forest, where he came across Crouch. Sir ordered him to stun him and leave him there, so Harry complied without question. He would get his answers soon enough.

The third task was simple enough. Of course, Harry knew every turn to take, how to react to every obstacle and not to do anything stupid, like wander off to help the other champions. At long last, he reached the cup and was standing in its eerie glow.

"Let me take over."

Harry nodded his consent, not that Sir really needed it. This was it. This was finally it. He was going to find out who Sir was. And after that, he was going to get his revenge on Dumbledore.

Sir made Harry's body walk forwards and levitated the cup. If he could have, Harry would have frowned in confusion. Why wasn't Sir taking it? Suddenly, Sir blasted a hole through the hedges, leaving a very clear path to the outside stadium. He walked out. With a wave of Harry's wand, his voice was magnified for all to hear.

"In another world, Dumbledore, in another time, the boy would have been the perfect weapon. He would have been your little loyal follower. But this is not that world. In this world, Dumbledore, the boy is *mine*."

Sir summoned a student at random. It was Cedric, the Hufflepuff champion. Sir made Harry smirk and grasp the boy firmly. Without further ado, Sir reached out, and took the cup.

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When Harry landed from the portkey, he stumbled slightly as control of his body was given back to him. It appeared deserted. Cedric leapt away from him.

"What are you doing?"

Before Harry could answer, a short, hooded figure walked slowly into view. Harry's forehead pounded in pain but he ignored it. He had felt worse before.

"*Kill the spare,*" came a voice from the figure's bundle. The figure obediently raised their wand.

"I wouldn't do that, if I were you."

Harry whirled around at a voice from behind him. A second hooded figure stood there, quite calm.

"And why not?" the bundle spoke again. Harry spun to face the bundle. He would rather not have this *thing* at his back.

"Because then you would have no one to resurrect yourself with. The boy is not your enemy."

Harry's mouth was dry. *One* of these three figures was Sir, not including Cedric. But which one?

"Allow me to introduce myself," said the voice from behind. Harry spun to face him again. "For the past few years I have been known as "Sir" and I have resided within the boy's head. I have taught him everything he knows. I have completely freed him from Dumbledore's hold. Do you know who I am yet, Harry?"

Perplexed, Harry shook his head. How was he supposed to know?

"No? Really? Let me give you a hint. On the day that you first visited the Hospital Wing at Hogwarts, Peeves broke a glass skull, freeing my soul. My soul turned to the nearest vessel which happened to be you. When you were attacked by a werewolf, I created the image of a centaur in your mind to save you. I could not have saved you from within your own body. I then used Jacques to get you to steal the Philosopher's Stone. However, you took it upon yourself to steal the stone for me. When I attacked the Weasley twins, I used the exact same attacks that I used many years ago. Dumbledore saw me doing those attacks then and recognised it. Do you know yet, Harry?"

Numbly, Harry shook his head.

"I suppose I shall just have to tell you then. It is high time you knew."

He lowered his hood.

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"My name, boy, is Lord Grindelwald."

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"*What?*"

It was Cedric who had spoken. He was gaping at the man before him. He did not look at all fearsome, as Harry had imagined him. He had hard features but he was lacking that distinct evil look about him. He had dirty blonde hair and grey eyes. He looked just like any other wizard.

As if reading his thoughts Sir – no, *Lord Grindelwald* – said, “I do not need looks to instil fear; my actions are by far louder words.”

The bundle spoke from behind them. “But where does that leave *me?*”

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Harry watched as Lord Voldemort renewed his body with an odd sense of detachment. He, quite frankly, felt nothing whatsoever towards him. Lord Grindelwald, however, had insisted that they watch as Cedric was used as a blood donor in the process and killed afterwards. Voldemort’s original plan had been to use Harry but Lord Grindelwald would not allow it. He had the upper hand. He had more power. He had the one person who could kill Voldemort.

Harry watched as Voldemort addressed his death eaters. There was a jolt of surprise that ran through his numb body when Voldemort mentioned the Lestranges. So *that* was why he wasn’t supposed to trust Nymph. He watched too, as Voldemort at last dismissed his followers then left in turn himself, after sending a speculative glance at Harry and Sir, Lord Grindelwald.

Lord Grindelwald.

Harry had been following the spirit of Lord Grindelwald for years. Obeying his commands without hesitation. He hadn’t *seemed* evil. But had it been an act? It was possible. Although, it made sense when Harry thought about it. Lord Grindelwald *hated* Dumbledore, disliked muggles and demanded obedience.

Harry didn’t want to leave him now. He felt an odd sense of loyalty towards him. They wanted the same things. They wanted to get them the same way. Why shouldn’t they work together?

Voldemort, it transpired, was merely a tool to Lord Grindelwald. Lord Grindelwald intended to use him to gather followers and as a decoy. After all, no one would believe that *he* had risen from the dead. He had convinced Harry that Voldemort *was* his enemy, however. Voldemort wanted to kill him, to use him, perhaps even more than Dumbledore. He was also the only one who could kill Harry. They

would use Voldemort, use his brute strength, but in the end they were in control. The two of them. Voldemort was their pawn.

Lord Grindelwald instructed him to return to Hogwarts and tell Dumbledore everything. Tell him that he was back, that he had been inside Harry's head for years, that he had committed many of the crimes that Dumbledore had blamed Harry for. At first Harry did not understand why but Lord Grindelwald explained that he wanted to kill Dumbledore and be undisputed the better of the two, no cheating. After that, he was going to liberate the world. Lord Grindelwald would demolish the government that made so many suffer and would let each person live by their own rules, the way they wanted.

Harry did not ask the question that was burning in his mind. He didn't want to disappoint Lord Grindelwald. But he could not help but think, if the world was sent into anarchy, wouldn't millions suffer and die?

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Harry did as Sir asked and returned to Hogwarts, to be the insider in the attack that was coming. A few days before the students left Hogwarts for the summer, they would attack. Dumbledore had never looked more apologetic in his life but Harry knew it was a mask, designed to wave him to his side. Outwardly, Harry joined Dumbledore but it was just to lure the man into a false sense of security. Oh so soon, he would have his revenge and Dumbledore would *pay* for all he had done.

In the month leading up to the attack, Harry did not talk to Mir or Nymph. He had confided in them all that had happened and they had not reacted well. Nymph had been overjoyed that Voldemort had returned and was disgusted with Harry for not sharing her opinion. Mir was outraged at them both supporting "dark" lords and refused to speak to them. Evidently he supported Dumbledore.

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The day of the attack was a clear, sunny day. It happened suddenly. In just a half hour, there were aurors, teachers, students, deatheaters, dark lords and Harry fighting. Harry knew his part in the fight. He would defeat Voldemort and claim his followers for himself and Lord

Grindelwald. As soon as he could, he sought out the dark lord and engaged him in a duel, using every skill he possessed.

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Harry watched with an odd sense of detachment as Voldemort struggled for breath, completely harmless and very much dying at his feet. He himself was panting too. The duel had been long and strenuous but at last he was beginning to feel that sense of accomplishment and fulfilment. For years, he had been a victim of this... thing... and now, at last, he was free. How ironic it was that the very thing Voldemort dismissed as weak was the thing that killed him. If only getting rid of Dumbledore was as simple as lodging a few daggers in his throat.

As if right on cue, a cry came from where Dumbledore and Lord Grindelwald were fighting. Lord Grindelwald was staring at Dumbledore in something that might be mistaken for fear; Harry was sure it was just shock at the fact that Lord Grindelwald's lifelong rival had disarmed him. Both men were breathing heavily. Harry simply looked at them a moment longer before running over to stand between Dumbledore's outstretched wand and Lord Grindelwald's chest.

"Harry, stand aside," urged Dumbledore, seeming quite desperate and more than a little put out by his interference. "This man has been controlling you for years; he has been *using* you, Harry, *manipulating* you. Because of him, you have never had the chance to live a normal life, the life that you deserve."

Harry snorted derisively in reply. "Funny," he said in a voice that he had intended to be cool but held a small hint of hurt in it. "I was going to say the same thing about you, the *great* Albus Dumbledore." It was really very rich of Dumbledore to accuse Lord Grindelwald of his own crimes.

"No, Harry." He had never heard Dumbledore's voice so close to pleading. Evidently the headmaster was aware of what was going on around him. The pupils fighting death eaters, the bodies lying on the ground, injured, Voldemort's still twitching body, the mayhem and destruction that had befallen the Quidditch pitch. "If there was ever

one thing I wanted for you, it was that you could grow up away from all the trouble that I knew would haunt you. Look around you; all the suffering, all the pain, it is because of *him*, Harry, not me. I have only wanted what was best for you and for the school. I only want peace, Harry.”

“Well then,” he said. He could hear the shaking in his own voice, feel the trembling in his hands, even as he reached behind his back and pulled out the gun that was concealed there to point it at Dumbledore’s heart. “You’ve failed, haven’t you? How does that make you feel, to hear it said out loud? You’ve *failed*, Dumbledore. In a few short hours the world as we know it will have dissolved into anarchy.”

“Harry –“ began Dumbledore after lowering his wand but he cut off as he whirled around, gun now pointing straight at Lord Grindelwald’s chest.

“What are you doing?” gasped Lord Grindelwald.

“I don’t want anarchy.”

There were tears running down Harry’s face but he paid them no heed. Both hands shaking around the gun, he steeled himself for what he had to do. Killing Voldemort was easy; the wizard was crazy and deserved to die. If he had been left to live, the whole world would have been exterminated. More than that, Harry felt no attachment towards him whatsoever. He only felt the slightest bit of hatred towards the now dying man and that was for killing his parents and taking one of his only real friends away from him.

But Sir, Lord Grindelwald, Harry wasn’t sure he could kill him. Lord Grindelwald had helped him in his time of need. He had trained him, helped him understand things he hadn’t a hope of understanding on his own. Lord Grindelwald had given him the one thing he wanted most of all; revenge against Dumbledore. And here he was, turning the gun on him, throwing away the thing he had dreamt of for years.

In many ways, he was killing the only father figure he had ever had.

But he had to do it.

“W-why?”

Harry could only shake his head, the tears running down his face threatening to overwhelm him.

“I *helped* you, Harry. I gave you everything you ever needed, ever *wanted*. I gave you power to do what you wanted most, to kill Dumbledore. I trained you as one of my own. I gave you everything you ever asked for.”

He was not the only one looking upset. Lord Grindelwald looked more betrayed than Harry could have ever imagined, making it only harder to finally do it. To pull that trigger. But he couldn't kill him yet, not until he knew why. He would give him that much.

“I know.” He let out a choked sob. “But I have to. I *have to*. If you live, the world – it will be chaos. All I ever wanted was peace. All I really wanted was, was for no one to be there, making my decisions for me. I don't want the attention. All those people, think of all the people – how many there will be suffering if you succeed. I can't live with that. With the guilt. Knowing I could have stopped it. I – All I ever wanted was... freedom.”

He could hardly breath through his silent sobs.

“All the innocent out there,” Lord Grindelwald gestured to the mayhem and fighting that was still continuing throughout the Quidditch pitch, ignorant of their situation. “Look at them. They do not think twice about who they fight. The innocent are just those who have yet to commit their crimes.

“They're not,” Harry bit out. He wasn't going to argue any more with him. Not now. “Thank you... for everything.”

He choked back another sob.

“I'm sorry.”

Harry closed his eyes and pulled back the trigger.

Time seemed to slow down. His eyes flew open. He saw the bullet leave the gun. Saw it fly through the air. Saw it hit Lord Grindelwald in the chest. Saw the man fall.

Harry fell to the ground too, gun still clutched in his hands. Shaking, tears openly falling down his face, he crawled over to Sir. He was still alive, but only just. He had perhaps a few moments more in his life.

"I'm sorry," Harry choked again. "I'm sorry."

"Harry, I –" Sir gasped, fighting for each breath. "I have something to – to tell you. I – your aunt – I know who – who she was when she – she died."

Harry's strangled sobs caught in his throat in shock.

"I – I was curious. I – I looked into it. I didn't – didn't want to tell you – in case you turned away from me." Even within moments of his death, Sir tried to crack a smile. "There were some parts that – that were true. Black was innocent and – and your mother *did* tell her the prophecy – but Dumbledore, Dumbledore was innocent, Harry. It was a deatheater – cast a confundus charm. Dumbledore never knew Black was innocent. He didn't know your parents would die – Dumbledore never knew, Harry."

Harry felt his world crashing down around him all over again. His sobs intensified for a moment but he fended them off somewhat. The one thing he had always known, his one constant in his life, was gone. He was lost in an ocean of reality.

"Who – who was it? Do you know?"

"It was Bellatrix Lestrange. Good bye, Harry."

At last, with one last shuddering breath, Sir's, Lord Grindelwald's, eyes closed and his suffering ended.

"I'm sorry," whispered Harry one last time.

The only father he had ever known, was dead. He had killed him.

Harry buried his face in his hands, still holding the gun. He did not know how long he sat there, trying to rid himself of the pain within him. He did not care.

Somewhere, in the dark recess of his mind, Harry decided what he was going to do next. His mind was completely numb with pain but still he managed to work out his next move. Staying at Hogwarts was not an option. Neither was staying where anyone else could ever find him. He did not want the fame he would get from this. He did not care about defeating Voldemort but killing Lord Grindelwald was not something he would celebrate, not something he could stand seeing other people celebrate. This, *this*, was not a good thing.

So he would leave. He would go live in some secluded place, away from all the eyes, away from all the pressure, away from all the oppression. He would go where no one would ever find him and he would leave everything he had ever done behind him. He did not want to remember.

Suddenly, he snapped to his sense when a hand fell on his shoulder. Still shaking with his tears, Harry raised his head and glanced at the offender. It was Dumbledore.

"It is alright, Harry," said Dumbledore quietly. "It is over now; there is no more expected of you. You have done many good things today. Lord Grindelwald was a murderer, a madman. He deserved much worse than death."

More tears sprung to Harry's eyes but they were not tears of sorrow. They were tears of rage.

"You would condemn a dead man who just redeemed you?" he shouted in fury and disbelief. "You may not have been guilty of sentencing my parents to death but you are responsible for so much more than that! Sir may have believed you to be a better man but he was wrong! Even in his death you befoul him! You are worse than him and Voldemort in every way!"

"Harry, I have tried all along to convince you that I did not know of Sirius's innocence. You did not believe me."

“THEN YOU SHOULD HAVE TRIED *HARDER!*”

So much could have been prevented if Dumbledore had only *tried*. But he hadn't. Dumbledore hadn't cared. He had never cared.

Without a second thought, Harry raised the gun still in his hand and now pointed it at Dumbledore, whose wand was still lowered.

“You won't do it, Harry,” said Dumbledore calmly. “You are not a killer.”

“I wasn't,” snarled Harry, tears still wet on his cheeks. “You made me one.”

But unlike Lord Grindelwald, he did not feel any remorse for what he was about to do. He would be doing the world a great service. The one thing he felt was just was the one thing he would condemned for.

“Goodbye, Dumbledore.”

Harry had the small hint of satisfaction as he watched Dumbledore's eyes widen in shock before he pulled the trigger. The bullet hit the old man in the head, killing him instantly. Dumbledore did not get the honour of having any last words. He did not deserve it.

Harry pushed back the grief that threatened to overwhelm him again. There would be time for that later. As he did so, however, a strange thought occurred to him. In one day he had killed two dark lords and the leader of the light. He had more than done his service to the world.

After Dumbledore's old body had hit the ground at last, one pair of duellists stuck out above all others. They had been standing just behind Dumbledore, so that when he fell, Harry immediately saw them. But they were not fighting. Their wands were raised but they were just staring at each other. Mir and Nymph did not seem to find it within themselves to kill each other.

As if feeling his tearstained gaze upon them, the pair turned as one, wands still raised, to look at Harry. Similarly, his gun was still raised. The gun that Nymph had given him as a present at the beginning of first year.

No one said anything. No one cast a spell. No one moved. The three of them simply stared at each other amidst the fighting that was still raging around them.

When had it come to this? Friend against friend against friend? There they were, friends from a common background, with no animosity for each other but with much in common, yet they were each fighting for a different side. Mir for the Dumbledore, Nymph for Voldemort and Harry for Sir. When had the world gone so wrong?

But they would not fight. Not them. Not three friends. Even with all their differences, they would not cast a spell against each other.

It hurt to look at them.

It hurt to look at Nymph because she had betrayed him and joined his enemy. In her face too, was the resemblance of her mother, the woman who had truly sentenced Harry's life to hell. But he would not go after Bellatrix Lestrange. If she ever found and attacked him, he would feel no remorse in killing her. But he would not go after her. He could not be the one to inflict unto Nymph the pain it would bring her.

It hurt to look at Mir because he had betrayed him and joined his enemy. As Harry stared at him, he could not help but think of how he had failed him. He had let him be captured and tortured without ever realising that he was still alive. He had not managed to locate his sister for him either.

But with as much as it hurt to look at them, it felt good too. Harry knew that this would be the last time he ever saw them. It was the last time they would ever stand together. Their differences did not matter. Not one of them would ever intentionally injure the others. They were friends until the end.

"It's over," was all Harry said and some how, they understood. This was it, the end. The end of the fighting, the end of the war, the end of the suffering, the end of their company.

And then Harry turned and he walked away. He walked away from the Quidditch pitch. He walked away from Hogwarts. He walked away from all the suffering and all the pain. But he knew, he knew the

wizarding world was on the brink of healing itself. He would never have to worry about endangering anyone again. Everyone would be okay now.

So he walked away and he didn't look back, not once. Harry just walked away from the life that he had hated so much. And he walked towards a new life, a life of peace and happiness, of solitude.

Harry walked towards a life alone.